

THE LAST BLING KING

BY

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HYPERREALITY BOOKS

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Front Cover Art: Street Graffiti
Back Cover Art: River God Tyne (1968). Sculpture by David Wynne.

ISBN 978-1-4092-7193-2

THE ILLUMINATI

‘All animals are created equal, but some animals are more equal than others.’

Orwell

Prologue

‘The Organisation’

Each year, they distribute a secret list of the world’s billionaires. Within twenty-four hours, all new names on the list receive an invitation that will change their lives forever. John Galt first found out about his invitation when a gold Bentley arrived at the gates of his London mansion, and the chauffeur informed him that a former U.S. president was sitting in the back waiting to speak to him. Galt immediately cancelled all of his appointments for the day.

They took Galt to a luxury airport that he didn’t know existed, put him on a private jet and flew him to an unlisted airport outside the exclusive Swiss ski resort of Davos, where the World Economic Forum holds its annual meeting. They checked him into the imperial suite of Davos’s plushiest hotel. When the former president took his leave, he warmly patted Galt on the shoulder, telling him that the ‘right people’ had great expectations of him. Galt was given an hour to gather himself. He stood in front of the bay window of his suite and took in the spectacular view of the Alps. He knew he had finally made it.

The knock on the door came at three p.m. ‘Good afternoon, Mr Galt,’ said a neat, officious man, clutching a golden folder. ‘We trust everything is to your satisfaction.’

Galt nodded. He was a tall, handsome, thirty-six-year-old man with salt and pepper hair, and blue-grey eyes that a female reporter once famously described as *dreamy*. ‘Most satisfactory.’

‘My name is Henry Payne,’ the other man said. ‘Let me officially welcome you to the Organisation.’ Payne reached into his breast pocket and took out a card made from a sparkling material that resembled flattened diamond. It was embossed with the words: *The Organisation 6006*. ‘Your Access All Areas pass, Mr Galt. Show that in any of our facilities and you can have anything you wish, no questions asked. You will not be charged for anything. You understand that we own the finest hotels in the world, in the most exclusive areas, as far from the chatter as can be contrived.’

‘The chatter?’

‘Our term for the ordinary people. They are the background noise to which we pay no attention.’

Galt smiled and slipped the card into his pocket.

Payne handed over the golden folder. ‘This is a briefing document concerning the Organisation’s modus operandi, the standards expected of its members, and the sanctions that will be imposed if any of its rules are broken. The third appendix is a list of the names and addresses of all six

thousand and six members.’ Payne tapped the folder. ‘This list must never fall into the wrong hands. We give it to you to show our trust in you, and to facilitate your dealings with our other members. We will deny all knowledge of the list if any outsider should lay his hands on it. You will immediately be excluded from the Organisation if such an event occurs as a result of any actions, or negligence, on your part.’

‘I understand.’

‘No one has ever betrayed the Organisation,’ Payne said. ‘The Organisation can uniquely provide everything of which any man or woman can dream. No one turns his back on that. Only six thousand and six people are permitted access to this earthly paradise. You are the latest.’

Galt couldn’t suppress a smile. For years he had resisted the notion that any such organisation existed, but as his wealth multiplied and he moved in increasingly refined circles, he began to hear rumours of a ruling fraternity that controlled the world. Eventually he became certain of its reality, and determined to become part of it. He cultivated the great and the good, made lavish donations to good causes and political campaign funds. He threw extravagant parties for society’s best people. Now it had all paid off.

‘You’re not a member yourself, are you, Mr Payne?’

‘No, I am a First Tier employee, granted direct access to the Organisation’s members. As you will read in the brochure, the Organisation has eighteen thousand employees in total, organised into six tiers. Only First Tier employees ever come into contact with members. We appreciate how much you wish to be surrounded by people you can trust implicitly. And of course we go to great lengths to protect you from those who would not sympathise, shall we say, with the aims of an exclusive organisation like ours.’

‘And how does the Organisation pay for all of this?’

‘You need not concern yourself with the finances of the Organisation.’

‘But every member is a billionaire?’

‘No,’ Payne said firmly. ‘The Organisation consists of ten categories. You belong to the super rich category, and the qualification here is simple: a member must have acquired audited assets worth one billion pounds sterling.’

‘The other categories?’

‘They are the world’s political, military, police, media, religious, intelligence, banking and business leadership. Super celebrities are the final category.’

‘So I’m in good company.’

‘Your fellow members are presidents, prime ministers, monarchs, cardinals, generals, admirals, air chiefs, police chiefs, chief executives, advertising bosses, directors of intelligence agencies, newspaper and magazine editors, media moguls, banking barons, supermodels, sports

legends and Hollywood's brightest stars. As you can see, the Organisation controls...'

Galt spread his hands wide. 'Everything.'

Payne grinned. 'Precisely.'

Galt peered through the two-way mirror, trying to work out what this hangar-sized place was. He and Payne were standing in a plush office overlooking a vast hi-tech room crammed with computers, plasma screens on the walls, and an army of efficient young Swiss men and women hard at work in identikit grey booths.

'Let me offer you a canapé.' Payne passed a silver tray to Galt.

'Almas caviar,' Galt observed approvingly.

'Only the best suffices for the members of the Organisation. I have Henri IV Dudognon Heritage cognac, if you wish.'

'Not at the moment. I'd like to know what this place is.'

'This is the control centre,' Payne said. 'From here we monitor the world, or rather everyone in the world worth monitoring.'

'What do you mean?'

'Most people are nobodies, for want of a better word. They are quite meaningless in the bigger scheme of things. They get on with their lives, pay their taxes, obey the law, don't cause us any trouble, and in return we don't cause them any trouble. We are interested only in outstanding individuals: those who will help the Organisation – and perhaps become members or employees one day – and those who might oppose it. Here we track about a million people. They are the brilliant students coming out of university, rising stars of business, politics, the media, budding entrepreneurs and so forth. We don't care about all the hewers of wood and drawers of water, as it says in the Bible.'

'When you say *track*?'

'We put every interesting person – anyone who excels in any way, those who stand out from the ordinary – on our watch list. We then monitor their career progression, their circle of friends, their bank accounts, their relationships, what they buy, where they go, what they read, their Myers-Briggs personality types and so forth. We build up detailed profiles of our subjects. The vast majority lead nowhere; the subjects simply don't make an impact on life, despite their talents. A few do. You, for instance. We identified you long ago as a potential high flier and a likely future member of the Organisation.'

'How much do you know about me?'

'Everything, Mr Galt. You wouldn't be standing here if we didn't. We have never made a mistake regarding membership of the Organisation. We needed to know if there was anything risky about you, anything that might

prove problematic. You were most carefully vetted and you passed every test.'

Part of Galt felt infuriated that he had been spied on, probably even in intimate situations. Another part was proud of everything he'd done, defiantly so. Come and look, he thought. Come and *learn*.

He scanned the control room, thinking that it resembled a gold panning operation. Most of what reached the pan was useless dirt, but a grain of gold might occasionally appear. 'And that?' He pointed at an enormous plasma screen overlooking the room of workers.

'That shows the current threat level,' Payne said. 'As you can see, it's green, indicating no threat. Amber would mean that a situation has arisen that is causing us some concern. Red puts us on full-scale alert. Naturally, it's practically always green.'

'When you say *threat*?' Galt's attention wandered towards one of the abstract paintings in the luxury office. A little-known Mondrian, he thought.

'I'm talking solely about threats to the Organisation,' Payne said. 'We do not concern ourselves with other matters. The items that typically attract our attention are suspicious deaths of any of our members, potentially hostile activities by anyone on our watch list, major world disasters, natural or manmade...anything that can affect the finances and power of the Organisation and its members.'

'What about terrorism?'

'Of course.'

'So why didn't you know about 9/11?'

'But we did, Mr Galt. It's a question of analysing whether a particular event is good or bad for the Organisation. The week before 9/11, the Organisation's ruling council met and determined that such an event would prove of significant benefit. It would shape American foreign policy in a way guaranteed to bring financial benefits to many members of the Organisation, to increase our power in a region in which our influence was, at that time, less than we desired. So, it was allowed to proceed without interference.'

'I see.' Galt felt a frisson of excitement. He loved the idea that only the interests of the Organisation were important. If others suffered, they were merely collateral damage.

'There are only one million interesting people in the world,' Payne said, taking a seat on a leather sofa. 'Isn't it a fascinating concept? Anyone who's not on our watch list is simply irrelevant. It sounds shocking and unlikely, yet it has absolutely proved to be the case.'

'It's a remarkable operation.' Galt was impressed by how zealous Payne was, giving every impression he'd gladly die in the service of the Organisation.

'When people talk about the world being controlled by Bohemian Grove, the Bilderberg Group, Skull and Bones, or whatever, they mean the Organisation,' Payne said. 'These are all subgroups of the Organisation. For

want of a better description, we are the New World Order, the One World Government, the Superclass, or whatever phraseology the conspiracy theorists care to use about us.'

'But aren't they right?'

'Yes, there is a conspiracy, and it's a most straightforward one: to promote the interests of the Organisation at all times, to ensure that six thousand and six men and women rule the world, and that their children succeed them, just as most of them have succeeded their parents.'

Galt sat back in his seat, his smile beaming back at him from the mirror opposite. 'I presume people like you don't openly acknowledge that you work for the Organisation.'

'We are officially classified as employees of the Global Enterprise Bank, based here in Davos. We are simply Swiss bankers as far as the world is concerned, and you know how famed Swiss bankers are for their secrecy. We never get asked awkward questions.'

'Do your families know about the Organisation?'

'Absolutely not.'

Galt loved the secrecy, but especially the godlike status of the Organisation's members. He couldn't wait for his triumphant homecoming as one of the divine. Perhaps he would see everything differently. He might even glow slightly. He wondered if others would sense the increase in his power. He anticipated that girls more beautiful than ever would throw themselves at him. And he would relish every moment.

'What's that?' Galt pointed at the threat screen again. 'Is it a training exercise?' The screen was flashing red.

Payne immediately stood up. 'Excuse me for a moment, Mr Galt.'

Galt stared at the screen. Something had happened somewhere in the world that had caused the Organisation serious concern. He sensed no panic in the control room. A few people were glancing up at the screen but most were going about their duties as calmly as before.

Payne soon returned, clearly agitated. 'Someone has gone off the grid. We can't track him.'

'Maybe he's dead?' Galt was surprised so much attention was being paid to one person.

'No, he deliberately removed himself.'

'Who is it?'

'He has interested us for a while. He lives on minimum wage in London.'

Galt stared quizzically. 'Why would you be interested in someone like that?'

'He ought to be one of the richest men in the world, perhaps even above your league.'

'Sorry, I'm not following.'

'He has the highest IQ ever recorded, Mr Galt. He's codenamed *Colossus* after a supercomputer in an old Cold War movie. It became so intelligent and

powerful that it took over the world, reducing the human race to servitude.'

'I see.' Galt considered for a moment. Most of the smartest people he knew were geeks, social inadequates trapped in their world of impractical ideas. 'But he's just one man. No big deal surely.'

There was a knock on the door. A pretty girl entered, passed a piece of paper to Payne then paused to give a seductive smile to Galt. He smiled back, wondering if he would see her later back at his suite.

Payne shook his head. 'We were advised by the Pentagon, NASA, the CIA and the world's top computer security experts that our private network was impenetrable.'

'He's hacked in?'

'Have a look for yourself. He's sent an email to every member of the Organisation.'

Galt took the message from Payne:

From User: Major William Martin

To: The Organisation

Subject: Three Years

Message: That's all you have left. Make the most of it. Then I will destroy you.

'Major William Martin?' Galt said. 'A one-man army?'

'It's a reference to a fictional character,' Payne replied. 'A corpse, in fact.'

'What?'

'British intelligence agents used this corpse in the Second World War. It was part of an elaborate deception to fool the Germans into thinking that the Allies wouldn't invade Sicily. The hope was that the Germans would withdraw troops from the island, and the Allied landing force would meet minimal resistance.'

'How do you know this?'

'It's one of my favourite stories. The Allies went to incredible lengths to make the deception convincing, including using a real corpse.'

'Sorry, I'm not following this. What has it got to do with the alert?'

'The target is telling us that we'll never be able to find him, that he'll destroy us with deception.'

'But it's all talk surely.'

'If anyone's capable of doing it, he is.'

'You're seriously telling me that some guy on minimum wage can beat...' Galt gestured around. '...all of this?'

'I believe it, Mr Galt. I led the team that designed this system. We tested it for every conceivable type of attack. We employed the world's top hackers to try to break in and promised them a million pounds if they succeeded. None did.'

‘OK, he’s good at computers. Big deal.’

‘You don’t understand, Mr Galt. The man who did this, I know him. That’s why he referred to Major Martin.’

‘Who is he then?’

It took Payne several moments to speak. ‘My son.’

‘Christ.’

‘I was always most careful,’ Payne said. ‘All he knew was that I was a senior figure in the bank. I have no idea how he found out about the Organisation.’ He paused. ‘My son and I, we didn’t...’

‘No need to explain. What will the Organisation do to him?’

Payne lowered his head. ‘What they always do to red alert threats.’

1

Three Years Later

The lunchtime drinkers in the *Thorn and Crown* stood up, lurching and swaying, throwing their arms around each other. They raised their glasses in a toast and clinked them together, spilling lager on the tattered, discoloured fabric that covered the floor – the Glue Carpet, as it was known to one and all. ‘To the Mars Bar man,’ the drinkers bellowed, ‘wherever the fuck you are.’

Greg Raslow, sitting a few feet away by the window, scowled. He sipped his pint of cider and slumped back against his seat. *Tossers!* If you came to this dump, you could only expect the worst. The *Thorn and Crown* was a ‘proper’ pub – unpretentious and reeking of human misery. The old clock on the wall next to the bar actually went backwards. Maybe people came here hoping their lives would go back in time too and return to some earlier, happier state, when they still had all the things that the forward motion of clock hands stripped from them with a mocking tick and a sniggering tock. A row of shrunken tribesmen’s heads, of all things, hung over the bar, above a row of dusty bottles of fine whiskies long since drunk dry. The only reason to come here was that the drink was cheap.

There should have been a sign above the *Thorn and Crown* saying, ‘Anyone going anywhere in life not welcome.’ Greg always suspected they were in a disguised anteroom of hell, with a sulphurous opening to the pits of despair concealed behind the toilets. That would certainly account for the smell.

He wondered what the drinking gang were doing here on Saturday lunchtime, without their customary undertaker-style suits. It was probably a team bonding session. *Jesus*. They were a debt collection mob, pretty much the lowest of the low in Greg’s eyes. Maybe it wouldn’t be long until they were on the phone to him, ready to send the heavies round. What sort of

person chose a job like that? – spending your whole life hassling people, trying to squeeze the last penny from people with no last pennies left. Another nice day at the office, dear? Yes, I screwed a hundred more desperately poor people today. Break out the Burgundy.

Greg got up and made his way to the toilet, along a short, brick corridor. He had to be careful about the way he walked thanks to his laziness on the laundry front, leaving him with only one clean pair of socks to put on that morning – a novelty pair, a cheesy Christmas present from a middle-aged aunt. They were decorated with Daleks from *Dr Who*, and they issued an ‘Exterminate!’ command from tiny speakers when a little microchip in the heel was nudged. So far, he had managed to keep his socks silent.

There were three urinals in the toilet, and two of the debt collectors were already there before Greg, flanking the central urinal. One man was fat and squat, the other tall and lank. Little and Large. The idea of relieving himself wedged between those two didn’t appeal to Greg, but he didn’t want to give the impression he had anything to hide, so he coughed and made a show of entering the scruffy single cubicle. Then he had no choice but to pretend he was using it for its intended function.

He turned to lock the door, only to see that it had been smashed off. When he took off his black donkey jacket to hang it on the door hook, he swiped at thin air. The cubicle was too dirty to rest his jacket anywhere else, so he put it back on. Self-consciously, he undid his belt and pulled down his trousers, shaking his head. He squatted above the discoloured seat and wearily looked around. No toilet paper, naturally. The graffiti on the door showed the usual collection of ejaculating penises, hairy vaginas with their labia gaping open, and assorted slogans of the usual type – *Life is shit and then you die; Andrew Thompson takes it up the arse; Phone Angie Bellor if you want dirty sex tonight*. Her mobile phone number was supplied, with the denunciation, or was it encouragement, that she was a ‘total slag’.

Greg closed his eyes. There he was, hiding in a cubicle, pretending to take a dump. He didn’t have a proper job, and never managed to keep for long any of the part-time ones that came his way, like the supermarket shelf stacking he was currently doing. So this was his life as an actor, or more accurately unemployed actor, or even more accurately someone always applying for acting jobs and getting a small part once a year, if it was a particularly good year. Maybe it was time to join the circus, but he suspected he’d arrived there long ago, the unfunny clown, crying not laughing.

‘Maybe that Mars Bar guy was a jerk who couldn’t handle the pressure,’ one of the debt collectors slurred.

Greg guessed it was the fat one talking. He pictured him placing his podgy hand against the tiled wall to steady himself.

‘Do you think you’ll ever have a Mars Bar day?’ the tall man replied.

‘You saying I can’t hack it?’

‘No, I reckon the guy had balls. I mean, he takes one look around the office and realises he hates the people he’s working with. He stands up, says he’s going out for a Mars Bar...and never comes back. In at 9 am. Out by 9.30. I call that style.’

Christ, Greg thought – *that’s me!* These days you could become an urban legend without even knowing it. He remembered all too vividly the sequence of events from last week. A half hour in a call centre: thirty minutes in hell. He didn’t have the guts to tell his call-centre employers to stick their ringing torture chamber up their arse. He waited until his section manager was away from his desk, then packed up, told the guy next to him he was getting a Mars Bar then walked out. He never did buy that Mars Bar...just went home. He returned to bed fully clothed and just pulled the duvet over his head.

Some idiot at the call centre had probably started a Facebook campaign in celebration of ‘Mars Bar Man’. Maybe it had taken off big time, like all the most ludicrous things. It had certainly reached the ears of the debt collectors.

‘I call him a cunt.’ The fat man hee hawed hysterically, probably pissing down his leg as his body shook with mirth.

Greg worried that the debt collectors might push open the cubicle’s unlocked door. Panicking, he pulled up his trousers and moved to the door to block it. Just in time. The fat man rapped on the door as he passed on his way out. ‘Having a sneaky Mars Bar in there, mate?’

‘Squeeze it out, son,’ his colleague cackled.

Greg turned and banged the heel of his shoe against the wall. Instantly, the Daleks’ catch phrase erupted at maximum volume. ‘Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!’

Fucking shit.

He begged his sock to shut up, but there was no deal. ‘Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!’

The debt collectors’ howls of laughter swept through the toilet. ‘I don’t fucking believe it,’ one of them bellowed. ‘Wait till I tell the others.’ They cackled their way out of the toilet.

Greg removed the offending sock then stamped on the heel to shut the damned thing up. The other sock needed the same treatment. God, how could he face going back out to the bar? He needed his own Tardis. Maybe he could go back in time and do his laundry.

He tidied himself up, shuffled out of the cubicle and went to the sink to rinse his hands. He stared into the mirror. Greg Raslow, 30. Occasional actor. Dark hair, blue eyes. 5’11”. Gaunt. What about haggard? Owner of a well-worn black donkey jacket, blue jeans, and black brogues with scuffed soles developing holes. He pressed a soap dispenser and a tiny blob of a weird pink substance appeared. He rubbed it into his hands then slowly rinsed it off.

When he returned to his table, he was expecting the worst from the debt collectors, but apart from a few glances and winks, there was nothing. He

couldn't believe his luck. Sipping his cider, he stared forlornly out of the window. A grey day. They were all like that now. He noticed a man in a dark suit heading towards the entrance, a brown bag clutched against his chest. The man, with receding grey hair, came in a bit breathless, and headed for the table of debt collectors.

'This month's financial figures are a disaster,' he announced. 'You've left me with no choice.' He shook the brown bag over the centre of the table. A dozen Mars Bars scattered out and rattled onto the table, some settling amongst puddles of spilled lager. The debt collectors gazed at the chocolate bars, appalled.

'Take your Mars Bars and go and find new jobs.'

There wasn't a sound. You would have thought the debt collectors had just received letters from themselves.

'Gotcha!' the newcomer bellowed, thrusting a bony finger at the others. 'Did I say you left me with no choice? Tell a lie, it was our best month yet! You lot are well and truly shafting all those crusties and losers out there. The drinks are on me.'

The table erupted in whoops and cheers, and a space was hurriedly cleared for the newcomer. He was their boss, undoubtedly. All bosses look the same. *Wankers*. This one was exactly like the boss Greg had endured for all of half an hour in that dismal call centre. An agency sent him there. They didn't care where they sent him, and he thought he didn't care either, until he actually got there.

He looked out of the window again, his eyes focusing on the bin next to the lamp post, overflowing with empty cans, scrunched up crisp packets and half-eaten kebabs. There was a sign on the side. As he tried to read what it said, a beautiful girl walked past, pulled along by a disgusting Chihuahua. The girl was wearing ugly shades – big chunky things lacking any style – that swamped her head. Greg never understood why it was almost impossible to find a woman who knew how to choose good sunglasses. Actually, he did know one. But, then, Chloe Moston had the finest taste in everything. He was due to meet her shortly.

He watched the girl's jean-clad arse as she sashayed past. It was shaped like a heart, like Chloe's. His eyes returned to the sign. The letters were typed in an odd font. 'Is your life garbage?' He nodded reflexively, picturing himself trapped inside the bin, fighting his way through stinking rubbish. The picture expanded and he had a vision of an endless forest of black garbage cans on a vast flat expanse stretching in all directions, each containing a desperate human being. A black garbage lorry was moving slowly along each row, emptying every bin. That was your life. What a life.

His attention switched to the TV, perched high up a few feet away. The news was on. The sound was low, so he could barely hear what the female presenter was saying. He thought she mentioned something about an archaeological team in Iran having discovered something 'remarkable'. With

a degree in history, he'd always had a fondness for archaeology and was curious about what they'd found.

Breaking News ticker tape ran along the bottom of the screen. 'Billionaire goes missing. Family expresses fears. No comment from police.'

Greg almost smiled. Just yesterday, another billionaire – the second richest man in the world, no less – was found murdered. Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of people. Would that be a world first – a serial killer of billionaires? Made a change from the usual victims. Maybe it was some sort of public service.

He finished his cider, got up and walked past the debt collectors. They were all waving Mars Bars in each other's faces and threatening to become Mars Bars guys if anyone disrespected them. He liked the sound of that Mars Bar guy – if only it hadn't been based on him.

As he reached the door, he heard the loud, grating scrape of many chairs being pulled back at once, and he turned to see what was happening. The debt collectors had got to their feet en masse.

'Exterminate! Exterminate! Exterminate!' they yelled, holding their hands straight in front of their faces like the Daleks' ray guns. They shrieked with laughter. Greg closed his eyes in horror. *Fucking novelty socks*. He thought of flipping them the finger, but couldn't help giving a rueful smile. Eventually he took a red-faced bow. Looked like another urban legend was in the making.

2

Greg went outside and breathed in the fresh air; well, as fresh as it ever got in this part of London. 'Hoxton...*shit*,' he mouthed, mimicking the immortal words of Martin Sheen at the start of *Apocalypse Now*, but with a local twist. How could Saigon be any worse than this place? He was sure there were no Dalek debt collectors in Vietnam.

To be fair, some parts of Hoxton were trendy, affluent, bohemian. They had *buzz*. Not the part where Greg lived, though. He stayed in a renovated tower block full of tiny studio apartments, in a housing estate so run down that people passing through slowed to a crawl as if all their energy had suddenly drained away from them.

Greg was running short of cash, so headed for the ATM in the nice part of town. It always amazed him that simply crossing a road was like opening a door to a magic world. In the Hoxton on the far side of the road, colours were more vibrant, the air crackled with energy, everything moved faster and more purposefully.

A young guy in a dark suit emerged from a shop and strode along the street. A cocky git, Greg would have thought if the guy didn't happen to have a yellow post-it note plastered on his back, saying, 'Kick my dumb arse.'

Greg, still recovering from his Dalek humiliation, wanted to help a fellow sufferer and thought he might be able to remove the post-it without the guy even noticing. His good deed for the day. He speeded up and, as he passed the guy, he flicked out his hand to snatch the post-it, but swiped fresh air.

A moment later, a hand gripped his shoulder.

Greg turned and found the young guy standing there...accompanied by a policeman who started waving the post-it back and forth like the definitive piece of evidence in a murder trial.

‘So, you think this is funny, do you?’ he said.

‘No, I was trying to remove it, officer. I...’

‘I saw you doing it.’

‘No, honestly, it...’

‘What a jerk,’ the young guy blurted before storming off.

‘You’re from over *there*, aren’t you?’ The policeman pointed back across the road as though across the gulf separating heaven and hell. Then he took the post-it and stuck it on Greg’s chest. ‘Read what it says.’

Greg shook his head. ‘This is ridiculous.’

‘Not cooperating, eh? Empty your pockets for me.’

‘You must be joking.’

‘Do you have any ID?’

‘Come on, officer.’

The policeman prodded Greg in the chest. ‘Stay on your own side of town in future. This is respectable around here.’ He thrust his finger into the centre of the post-it note. ‘If I see you pulling any more stunts, you’ll be the one getting your dumb arse kicked.’

Greg put the post-it in his pocket. He was contemplating framing it. Maybe he’d hang his Dalek socks beneath it.

A Securicor van was parked outside the bank and Greg automatically thought of heists and shootouts. But the bank had closed half an hour earlier and there was no one around.

He inserted his card in the ATM, tapped in his PIN, pressed the usual buttons and waited for his cash to emerge.

And waited.

Sorry, this machine is not working at this time, a message flashed up on the screen. *Please try an alternative machine, or ask a member of customer services for assistance*. With the bank closed, there was no alternative machine available. Fucking machines. Fucking banks. Fucking nothing works. Go on, chew my card, he thought. The sun came out, almost as though it wanted a better view of the chump. Something shimmered in the reflection on the screen: a beautiful girl.

Greg turned round and his eyes locked on. A raven-haired girl in a figure-hugging red dress was standing near him. He tried to summon a nonchalant smile but failed. The beauty raised her hand and waved. For a

mad moment, Greg's hand rose to return the wave. But it *can't* be me. Sure enough, a man sauntered past: about fifty, balding, in a smart grey suit. Nothing special, but clearly rich.

Greg turned back to the ATM. His card reappeared, accompanied by a churning and grinding sound. He snatched it out of the slot and shoved it into his pocket. Maybe it was just as well the machine was on the blink. He couldn't have had more than about £20 in his account anyway. Another night of beans on toast.

He gazed at the screen reflection again. Beauty was kissing the man. She could get anyone, so why that guy? He turned slowly, hoping to get a good, satisfying look at her. The woman's eyes were a vivid, electrifying blue, just the way he liked. A look flashed over them when she noticed him looking at her – the *in your dreams* look. The sun glinted off the rich guy's gold Rolex. Greg's own watch was a plastic Casio. He glanced at the man's shoes. Shining, slick, brand new. Definitely without holes in the soles.

Without warning, the Securicor van blared out a message: 'Warning Securicor Van reversing... warning Securicor Van reversing.' But it wasn't reversing. It wasn't doing anything. Thanks to the tinted windows, it was impossible to make out if anyone was inside. Then the message changed: 'Attention, the alarm has been sounded. An attempted robbery is in progress. Please alert the police.' A little crowd of passers by gathered and gazed at the van. The message wouldn't shut up. Over and over it repeated itself, becoming more annoying with each iteration. Kids with skateboards laughed and circled the van, whooping like red Indians. The onlookers started to drift away. Greg frowned. Empty ATM. Empty bank. Empty Securicor van. No police. No robbers. No robbery. A Hoxton farce. *Welcome to my world*.

When he turned, he found the police officer from before heading towards him.

'I might have known I'd find you here. Didn't I warn you to clear off?'

'I haven't done anything wrong, officer.'

'I've got my eye on you.' The policeman's two-way radio crackled and he turned to one side.

Greg took out the post-it from his pocket. *Do it*, it seemed to whisper to him. *No, I can't*. But his hand, seemingly with a life of its own, stretched out, and, with the gentlest of touches, stuck the note to the cop's back.

The skateboarders swept past and started guffawing. One of them high fived Greg. He felt elated, but the good feeling didn't last. As he plodded along the street back towards home, he noticed that every other lamppost had a one-word sign stuck on it. '*Dissatisfied?*' each proclaimed in the same eye-catching font as the sign on the bin. An advertising campaign? A graffiti artist's tag? A joke?

After ten lampposts, the trail stopped. Greg glanced around, hoping for a punchline. There was another sign in the window of a deserted shop. '*Dissatisfied?*' it repeated. 'Come inside and change your life.'

‘Hey, tosser, what are you up to?’ A man’s voice rang out, making Greg turn to the right. He immediately smiled. ‘Fuck off, wanker!’

‘Hey, I’ve run out of Mars Bars,’ the man’s female companion said. ‘Know where I can get one?’

‘Yeah, and you can fuck off too.’

Greg’s two best friends were John Paul Harker and Chloe Moston. John Paul was dressed in his customary weekend wear of Reebok training shoes, black bootcut jeans and a light camouflage jacket. At 31, he was a year older than Greg. Although he was originally from Glasgow, he was mercifully free of a strong accent. He was of average height, average weight, with longish blond hair that he claimed gave him a swashbuckling look. A salesman, he reckoned he could sell anything. He’d certainly given it a good try since he’d had at least eight jobs in the five years Greg had known him. John Paul liked to say that those many jobs were proof of how good he was. Greg suspected it proved the opposite. Not that he ever said that. Besides, he was in no position to criticise.

As for Chloe, Greg loved her energy and creativity. In fact he loved pretty much everything about her: the way she closed her eyes when she laughed, the weird and wonderful hats she wore, even her sarcasm. She crackled with life and colour where other were encased in grey. Greg often worried that he was one of those grey people too, but being with Chloe gave him hope. And it didn’t do any harm that she was lovely. She was twenty-five and gorgeous. She had blonde hair in a bob, with a longish fringe, usually covered by a stylish hat. Today she was sporting a trilby. It looked fabulous on her. She was dressed in tight blue jeans and a tan-coloured leather jacket. Her eyes were an intense blue, and she had a slim but curvy figure that never failed to attract male attention.

Greg had developed a crush on Chloe right from the get-go, but she’d never shown the slightest sign of reciprocating. She was an artist, meaning that she was as poor as Greg and John Paul. They all lived on the ground floor of the same apartment block, in identical studio apartments, though they’d each decorated in different ways. Greg’s place was a tip, John Paul’s the opposite, while Chloe’s was kooky.

‘So, are you?’ John Paul pointed at the sign in the window. ‘Dissatisfied, I mean.’

‘What do you think?’ Greg answered.

‘Are you going in?’ Chloe said. ‘We’ll come with you. It could be fun.’

Greg looked around. ‘It’s deserted.’

‘Well, one thing’s for sure,’ Chloe said, ‘you won’t be dissatisfied when we have our treat tonight.’

John Paul grinned. ‘I’ve been looking forward to this all year.’

Greg took out his credit card. ‘Plastic to the rescue,’ he said glumly.

‘Everything’s ready for us at my studio,’ Chloe said.

Greg smiled. 'I love a girl with a plan.' They were having their annual wannabe blowout when they pretended to be the people they wanted to be – rich, successful, admired. It boiled down to getting dressed up and going into the city centre for a posh meal.

'Bloody hell. Where did *they* come from?' Chloe nodded towards the far end of the street.

Two lines of cops in fluorescent yellow jackets with silver reflective strips were shepherding a crowd of the strangest protesters Greg had ever seen. There wasn't a sound. No chanting, no klaxon horns, no whistles. Not even a cough. The protestors were all dressed in identical raincoats and boater hats – made from old newspapers.

'I hope it doesn't rain,' John Paul joked.

The police escort filed past with bored expressions.

One of the demonstrators stepped through the police line and approached the three friends. He handed each of them a card then moved off. The friends looked at each other. The cards were blank on both sides.

'What the hell?' Chloe stopped another of the demonstrators and pointed at the card. 'What's this supposed to be?'

'We're just the background in life,' the man said, 'the extras holding flags as the main show goes by. No one notices us.' He pointed at the newsprint on his coat. 'You'll never find any stories about us. No one writes about us. You'll never see any pictures of us. It's impossible to photograph the invisible.'

Chloe glanced at Greg and John Paul. 'Interesting,' she said to the demonstrator. 'So, why are you marching?'

'We're campaigning to become *people*.'

'What's your name?' John Paul asked.

'I don't have one, not while society's the way it is. If you want to join us, just go through that door. If enough people do it, we'll change the world.' He smiled then went on his way.

Greg gazed at the card. For a moment, it seemed to shimmer then show a strange vision – a long line of grey people without separate identities going through a door and coming out on the other side full of colour, each unique and wonderful, buzzing and laughing. Greg so much wanted that vision to come true. He wondered what it would be like if his blood had many colours instead of just red. If he were cut, a rainbow would form around him. He sometimes thought rainbow blood flowed through Chloe. His big fear was that he didn't have it in him to be anything more than a spectator in life, watching the carnival going by. He slipped the card into his pocket.

'Bizarre,' Chloe said.

'Totally,' John Paul agreed.

Greg shrugged, turned and faced the shop door. It was just an ordinary black-varnished door, with the paint flaking off. No portal to a new world.

John Paul stopped a couple of policeman and asked what the protestors

were called.

‘Dunno,’ one said with a shrug. ‘Don’t care. Bunch of losers.’

‘They’re loonies,’ the other said with a smirk. ‘They call themselves the League for the Liberation of Nobodies.’

3

‘Look, more of them!’ Greg gazed out of one of the porthole windows in Chloe’s ramshackle little studio. The whole of Hoxton High Street had been taken over by demonstrators. A constant stream of reinforcements kept arriving. ‘Bloody hell, where are they all coming from?’

‘You’ll never catch me calling myself a nobody,’ John Paul said.

‘Forget about them.’ Chloe poured three glasses of red wine. ‘It’s probably just some flash mob or a Facebook campaign. Come on, we have to drink up and dress up...it’s Wannabe Day!’ She nodded at the rail where three outfits were waiting. A friend of hers who worked in a clothes hire shop had managed to get them some freebies for the night: a royal blue ball gown for her, and snazzy tuxedos for John Paul and Greg. Well, freebie wasn’t exactly the right word. She was going to pay back her friend by giving her a *pornament* – a porn ornament. That was how Chloe made her living: making and selling customised pornaments. Her best-selling line was a straightforward plaster cast of a customer’s genitals. It had become a bit of a thing for boys and girls to have their genitals immortalised in plaster, to be presented to their lover on a special occasion such as birthday or St Valentine’s Day. Some of the better-endowed boys kept their pornaments for themselves and placed them prominently on their mantelpieces to impress prospective girlfriends.

Chloe once let it slip that if a male client couldn’t get hard then she had to masturbate him with a Marigold-encased hand. No one could accuse her of not going the extra mile for her art, Greg thought.

They all put on their glad rags, and Chloe placed a fascinator in her hair. She grandiosely described it as, ‘A low sweep of black feathers with diamante on silver wires, mounted on a thin Alice Band.’

‘It suits you,’ Greg said.

‘You’re such a sweetie. Why does John Paul never compliment me?’

John Paul laughed. ‘Come on, you know Greg’s your biggest fan.’

‘Are you?’ Chloe coquettishly gazed at Greg.

‘I’ll set up your digital camera for a timed picture,’ Greg said hurriedly. He hated it when Chloe teased him.

Chloe stood in the centre and struck a pose while Greg and John Paul slouched on either side, feigning boredom. The camera flashed after five seconds.

‘Do you think we’ll still be doing this when we’re old?’ Chloe said. ‘Maybe I’ll end up with a board plastered with fifty photos like this one, each a year older than the last.’

Greg wandered over to one of the shelves covered with pornaments. ‘So, how many of these have you done, Chloe?’

‘Not enough to let me afford anything better than a poxy studio apartment in shitty Hoxton, that’s for sure. I’d be better off being a lap dancer. I mean, one guy actually came when I was getting him hard. I got spunk in my eye, for God’s sake. I’m pretty sure hookers charge a lot for that sort of thing. Don’t they call it facialising or something? The guy did give me a fifty-quid apology tip, bless him.’

‘Is that what you call coming into some money?’ Greg quipped.

Chloe guffawed, but frowned just as quickly. ‘I need better clients,’ she said wearily. ‘Celebrities and rich City guys – people who can afford exotic materials. I’d love to work with diamond and gold. Damien Hirst got paid a fortune for making that awful bling skull of his. What about bling genitalia? – I’m sure loads of rich fuckers would love to have their pride and joy turned into bling art.’

‘Goldmember, eh?’ John Paul said.

‘I can imagine a few footballers would be up for a diamond dick,’ Greg said. ‘Or maybe a mirrored penis so that they could admire their reflection in it. The cocks of the walk, right?’

‘What do you think of the stuff I’ve been working on for my new exhibition?’ Chloe asked.

Greg gazed at the corner of the room, at the weird collection of steel wires, optical fibre cables and plaster casts of body parts. There were also whips, canes, blindfolds, gags, ropes and handcuffs. ‘What’s the plan?’ he asked.

‘I’m going to link the body parts using the wires and cables. I’ll have different colours flowing through the optical fibres, like in those multicoloured Christmas trees you see. Then I’ll suspend the bodies from the ceiling. The idea is to do a few mild S&M scenarios: couples spanking each other and the like. Different colours will flow through the fibres, highlighting different body parts at different times. You’ll see a hand glowing yellow, then a bottom turning red, and so on.’

‘Going for the shock value?’ John Paul said. ‘How unlike you.’

‘I’m just giving the public what they want. We live in the Society of the Sensational. If something’s not screaming at you, you can’t hear it, right? Haven’t you noticed how they crank up the volume during ad breaks on TV? Everything has to grab you and practically beat you up.’

‘Is it going to be your biggest and best exhibition yet?’ John Paul asked.

Chloe shrugged. ‘It will be the usual story. The gawpers and gigglers will turn up, but there won’t be anyone with big chequebooks and juicy credit cards.’

‘Poor little Chloe.’ John Paul wiped a fake tear from his eye. ‘No rich clients to massage her ego and launch her to stardom.’

‘Watch it, buster. Anyway, I’m doing my struggling artist bit at the moment.’

‘Hey, look at the TV,’ Greg said. ‘Turn it up.’

‘Fear stalks London’s billionaires,’ a banner headline proclaimed on the portable TV. ‘Panic has gripped the capital’s richest residents following the gruesome discovery of the body of Russian oligarch Gregori Shilepov,’ a newscaster said. ‘Shilepov, a prominent businessman living in London’s affluent Mayfair district, was found dead this morning. His body, like that of fellow murdered billionaire Anatoli Kranovic, was inscribed with unknown symbols on his back and chest. Speculation is rife of a serial killer – already being referred to as the Midas Murderer – targeting super rich foreigners. Another rumour is that the Russian mafia have embarked on a gang war in London. Mr Shilepov and Mr Kranovic were both said to have strong gangland connections.’

‘Let’s hope no one mistakes us for billionaires,’ Chloe said as she admired herself in a mirror.

‘Not much danger,’ Greg muttered. No matter what he wore, he somehow never looked stylish. It was as though he lacked the style gene, unlike Chloe who could wear practically anything and get away with it.

‘Come on, let’s get out of here,’ John Paul said. ‘It’s time to face the hell mouth. Er, I mean the Tube.’

The Tube supplied its usual slice of bizarreness in the shape of a group of hen night girls, their eyelids painted with realistic eyes so that when they closed their eyes it looked as though they were still open. Chloe found it amusing while Greg whispered that it spooked him out a bit.

‘Right,’ John Paul said after they’d been on the go for a few minutes. ‘If your life could be like a movie, which one would you choose? I’m picking *Scarface*. Remember Tony Montana? What a man. I loved how he beat the gang bosses at their own game. They relied on brute force, so he was even more brutal. He just went for it. I want to be like that. Even the way he died was glorious.’ He held up an imaginary gun. ‘Say hello to my little friend.’

‘What?’ Chloe raised her eyebrows.

‘Come on, it’s the most famous line in the movie. It’s when Al Pacino brings out his M16 automatic rifle with grenade launcher. He shoots up the whole place, and launches a grenade or two at the Columbians who’ve come to kill him. Caboom!’ John Paul grinned like a little boy.

‘I’m going for Zara in *The Millionaires’ Death Club*,’ Chloe said. ‘Smart, sassy, totally in control, with men falling at her feet. No one could resist her. That babe could have anything she wanted.’

‘Oh, God, no,’ John Paul said. ‘Zara’s an überbitch.’

‘Deep down, every nice girl wants to be a bitch,’ Chloe said. ‘Bitches and blondes – they have so much more fun.’

‘What about you, Greg?’ John Paul asked, pretending to yawn.

‘It has to be Neo in *The Matrix*. He was the Chosen One, seeing through the illusion. I love the idea of “reality” being adjustable. Walking through walls, jumping off cliffs, dodging bullets, flying. Isn’t that such a liberating thought?’

They sat back and watched the hen night girls looking, and not looking, with their real and painted eyes.

The friends got off at Green Park in Mayfair and then embarked on the little pilgrimage that they had nicknamed ‘the Longing’. This involved walking through the arched arcade of the Ritz – one of London’s most glamorous five-star hotels – turning the corner, then stopping outside the famous front entrance.

The Longing was so-called because John Paul once said he longed to have tea at the Ritz...or rather champagne afternoon tea at 7.30 pm. He wanted to promenade through the hotel’s famous Long Gallery and arrive at the Palm Court with its grand chandeliers, marble columns, gilded statues, extravagant floral displays and fine chamber music. There he would enjoy two finely cut smoked salmon sandwiches, followed by freshly baked scones with Devonshire clotted cream and strawberry preserve, and finished off with a generous slice of Ritz chocolate cake. To drink, he would have a pot of Lapsang Souchong Imperial tea, washed down, if that wasn’t a contradiction in terms, by a glass of Louis Roederer Cristal vintage champagne.

The problem was that this ceremony cost a hefty fifty pounds. John Paul could have scraped the money together, but that wasn’t the point. His aim was to be rich enough to do it properly, to go in there as though he belonged. If he could achieve that, it would be certain proof he’d made it in life. When he first mentioned his dream to Chloe, she came up with this idea for an annual trip to the pavement outside the Ritz. She said it reminded her of kids pressing their noses against the windows of sweet shops crammed with tantalising candy. It was decided that the Longing would take place on the anniversary of the day when the three friends first met – February 5th.

This was their fourth enacting of the Longing, and the second time they’d encountered Robert, the current doorman.

‘You lot again?’ Robert dropped the smooth tone he reserved for grovelling to hotel guests, replacing it with an East End growl.

‘You remembered,’ Chloe said.

‘Oh, I always remember the strange ones.’ Robert smiled darkly. ‘So, are you coming in this time, or are you still staying out in the cold and dark?’

‘The cold and dark,’ John Paul said.

‘Still not made it then?’

Greg was amazed that the doorman had remembered the details of their

conversation from last year when John Paul explained what they were up to.

John Paul shook his head. 'Nah, not this time. Next year's the big one.'

'I've been saying that for thirty years, mate, and look at me. Stop dreaming and get out there and do it.'

John Paul stared at the doorman, but didn't answer.

'Are you sure you don't want to come in?' Robert asked again. 'You're dressed right.'

John Paul shook his head.

A limo pulled up and the doorman busied himself with greeting a distinguished elderly couple, all clipped accents, stiff movements, pearl necklaces and gold cufflinks.

The three friends were fascinated. They loved watching everyone who went in and out of the Ritz, wondering who they were and what they did. Usually, they felt the Ritz was wasted on the people who actually went there.

'They ought to bring in orphans from Zimbabwe or somewhere,' Chloe said. 'Imagine the wonder in the eyes of little African kids if they could come here. What mischief they'd get up to. It would be fab, so much better than all those stuffy, rich old people.'

They lingered out there in the cold. The facade of the hotel looked particularly majestic in the dark. At first, the longing had been very much on John Paul's part – a Glaswegian aspiring to one of the poshest English experiences – but now the other two longed for it almost as much.

Greg couldn't help wondering if it was healthy to be watching the great and the good going in and out of the Ritz. Sometimes it seemed as though there was a force field around the hotel that the rich could move through at will but which proved impenetrable to everyone else. The rest got squashed against it, staring at the luxuries that were so close yet beyond their touch. He thought of the world of the rich and famous as a separate reality. *Bling World* he called it. In *Bling World*, the blingless were invisible.

Some policemen in their high visibility yellow jackets came round the corner, followed by League for the Liberation of Nobodies demonstrators in their tattered newspaper hats and coats. The group stopped outside the front entrance.

Robert looked aghast. 'You can't let these people stand there.'

One of the demonstrators tried to shake Robert's hand. 'You're a nobody like us. We'll free you from being a servant of others.'

'You're nuts.' The doorman pulled his hand away. 'I'm getting the manager.'

The demonstrators turned to the three friends. 'Join us. We are the LLN. We are the Plan.'

John Paul scowled. 'Time to get out of here.' The friends headed off towards Piccadilly Circus.

‘You know what,’ Chloe said. ‘I’m officially fascinated by those demonstrators. Wasn’t it great the way that guy said, “We are the LLN. We are the Plan.” Maybe I’ll start saying, “I am Chloe. I am the Answer.”’

‘Forget them,’ Greg said, ‘I’m starving. Let’s get along to the restaurant.’

They passed an old man with a bobble hat and woollen gloves selling an evening newspaper. He shouted something incomprehensible. Greg gazed at the main headline: ‘Third billionaire kidnapped.’ This time it wasn’t a Russian with gangland connections, it was Sir Henry Laybury, one of Britain’s richest entrepreneurs and member of the Knights of the Garter.

‘Not having a good time of it, right now, eh?’ John Paul said. ‘The super rich, I mean. The LLN are picketing them, and a serial killer is bumping them off.’

‘Maybe we ought to be on our guard tonight,’ Greg said with a nervous laugh. ‘After all, we’re going to one of the poshest restaurants in London.’

‘No danger of our being mistaken for billionaires,’ Chloe said. ‘Especially in your case, Greg. Come on, stop slouching. Shoulders back. You’re meant to be an actor.’

Greg scowled.

‘We can’t even afford this,’ John Paul said. ‘I’m in the same boat as Greg...the credit card boat, springing leaks everywhere.’

‘I’ll be using plain cash,’ Chloe said. ‘I got a hundred quid yesterday for one of my plaster cocks.’

Greg raised his eyebrows. ‘You can always rely on Chloe to raise the tone. *Not.*’

4

This year the friends had chosen *Alberigo*, just off Piccadilly Circus, for their luxury meal. It was considerably more expensive than tea in the Ritz, but that wasn’t the point.

Alberigo had recently been awarded three Michelin stars and was now attracting the finest clientele in the capital. It was always busy, tables having to be booked three months in advance. Celebrity chef Logan Reeves, notorious for shouting at his clientele if they didn’t show sufficient grovelling appreciation of his culinary delights, was in charge, though, fortunately perhaps, he was usually elsewhere making TV programmes.

Reeves’ flagship was glass-fronted, with stylish contemporary design: chrome fittings, tasteful colours, oak floorboards, modern art on the walls, subdued lighting. The clientele were young, trendy and loaded, or middle-aged, not so trendy but still loaded, or very old and very loaded. Whatever they were, they were loaded. Except for Greg, Chloe and John Paul.

The waiter cottoned on quickly that they were plebs masquerading as toffs. Instead of sneering at them, he joined in with the fun and treated them

royally. His name was Dominic, or, when he chose to adopt a pretentious French persona at various points in the proceedings, *Dominique*. They had a good crack with him, laughing as he played up to them by bowing and scraping and calling the two men ‘your lordships’, while referring to Chloe as ‘ma’am’.

The evening began with a glass of Veuve-Cliquot Champagne all round. The three friends always had the same things to eat and drink. That was part of their ceremony. Tonight, for a radical change, they were going for a top-of-the-range vegetarian experience. It was the first time they’d ever tried a vegetarian meal, and this seemed like the best place to give it a go.

For starters, they had braised baby leeks with potato and truffle shavings laced with vinaigrette. Next up was a soup of pumpkin puree in a truffle broth with cracked roasted hazelnuts and pumpkin oil. The main meal was a Camarolli risotto with black Perigord Truffle. A culinary triumph.

Just as Dominic was clearing away the main meal, after treating the friends to a long discourse on how to find Perigord truffles – ‘black diamonds’ – the glass front of the restaurant abruptly blazed with flashing lights.

‘Celebrity alert,’ Dominic said with a wink.

They all stared at the amazing bombardment of flash photography. Greg thought it was like old newsreels of the start of famous battles where the attackers pounded the enemy lines with tens of thousands of artillery shells, making the night sky convulse with flashes.

The diners in the restaurant had stopped eating and chatting. Everyone was staring at the front doors, waiting to see which celebrities would arrive, which divine ones would descend from on high to enter the humble world of mortals.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Dominic muttered.

Greg gazed at Chloe and John Paul. They were both star-struck. Fuck it, he was too. In front of them was one of the most famous couples on earth: *Dosh and Rex*. Dosh, with her peroxide Marilyn Monroe hairdo, was more voluptuous than anyone Greg had ever seen. Her famously fake, enhanced breasts were making little effort to stay within the confines of the flimsiest of silver silk dresses, one that redefined *slinky*. Her white handbag was covered with a jumble of familiar symbols – pound, dollar and euro signs, all in gold.

As for Rex, or Harry Prince to give him his real name, legend fell far short of the reality. Was it possible for someone to become mythical in his own lifetime? Early in his career, the tabloids had seized the opportunity to promote him from prince to king when he scored the winner for Chelsea in the FA Cup Final. Even that wasn’t quite grand enough. Only the Latin word for king was up to the task. And when he scored the last-minute free-kick goal that took England to the World Cup finals, Rex became the most loved person in the country. One tabloid decided to crown him at a special

ceremony in the Tower of London, with the Crown Jewels on full display behind him. They didn't glint and gleam half as much as he did.

Rex was so familiar from his endless appearances on TV chat shows and commercials, from his picture adorning countless billboards and magazine ads, that he seemed like some sort of walking photograph. He was there and yet somehow he wasn't because it was just too hard to believe.

Three shaven-headed security guys in dark suits accompanied the two megastars. They were big, muscular men with darting eyes. Rex was known to like having ex-SAS around him.

Then came another two people. Greg shook his head in disbelief. Bloody hell, what a small world – it was the couple he'd seen outside the bank in Hoxton that lunchtime. The odds against that had to be astronomical, he thought. The gorgeous girl with the raven hair must be Dosh and Rex's agent, he figured, and the distinguished grey-haired man was probably their manager. It still didn't seem right that the beauty was with a guy probably more than twenty years older.

'Wankers.' John Paul said, his eyes fixed on Dosh and Rex. 'They must be here to celebrate Dosh's Oscar nomination. Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous? I mean, she plays herself in a cameo role in a movie then gets nominated for best supporting actress. How can you be acting if you're playing yourself?'

'Don't you think she's gorgeous?' Chloe said. 'Like one of those screen goddesses from Hollywood's golden age.'

'Are you crazy? She's plastic fantastic, and that's not a compliment.'

'She's stunning,' Greg said.

'No way are you saying that,' John Paul said. 'She's a total witch, holding back the years with lotions, potions and extensive cosmetic surgery.'

'No, not Dosh. I'm talking about the girl with them. Look at that raven hair. Black Beauty, or what? I'm sure I saw her in Hoxton earlier today.'

'Yeah, right, why would someone from Dosh and Rex's entourage live near us? She doesn't look like she has to rough it, does she?'

'Come off it, loads of rich people live in the nice part of Hoxton. Or maybe she was visiting relatives, or something. It was definitely her.'

Chloe nudged Greg. 'Guess who's got a crush? Look, you're blushing. Should I go over there and say, "My friend fancies you."'

'That's not funny.'

'Go on. Go over and chat her up.'

'Yeah, go for it, Greg,' John Paul said. 'You're an actor. Act out a seduction scene.'

'News flash. Actors need scripts.'

'Only the bad ones,' Chloe sniggered.

Greg stared at his plate. 'So, I'm crap, is that it?'

'No, that came out wrong. What I meant to say was...'

'You think I'm a joke, don't you?'

‘You know I don’t. You’re unlucky, that’s all.’

‘If you’re so smart, Chloe,’ Greg retaliated, ‘why don’t you go over and sell them your art? You’re always banging on about having rich clients. Well, they don’t come bigger than Dosh and Rex. Invite them round to your studio. Tell them you’re the latest thing.’

John Paul sniggered.

‘Hey, I’ve amused the world’s greatest salesman,’ Greg snapped. ‘Here’s your golden chance too, John Paul. Prove you can sell to the stars. Show me how to be a big success.’

Chloe and John Paul gave each other an embarrassed look.

‘Talking the talk is easy,’ Greg said. ‘It’s walking the walk that’s the difficult part.’

Dominic came over and instantly tuned into the bad atmosphere. ‘Oh, I think this table needs a dessert menu,’ he said diplomatically. ‘Blueberry pie banishes the blues, or something like that.’ He handed over the menus, then snapped to attention. ‘You who are about to enjoy the sugar rush, we salute you.’ He broke into a big smile. ‘Hey, the manager has just told me I’m going to be serving Dosh and Rex. Wish me luck.’

The three friends managed a feeble smile and watched as Dominic headed towards the celebrity table.

‘What a bunch of losers we are,’ Chloe said, flicking through the dessert menu. ‘Getting at each other just because of some celebrities. We were having a great time before they came in.’

‘But let’s face it,’ John Paul said, ‘those people make things happen. We can dream and spout hot air and moan and groan about life, but we can’t change anything. *They* can.’ He sipped some of his wine. ‘I’m not sure how we do it, but shouldn’t we try to take advantage of this situation? We’ll never get the chance again.’

‘What are you suggesting?’ Chloe said. ‘That we rush after them when they go to the toilet? You and Greg could stand on either side of Rex at the urinals and bombard each famous ear with all your great ideas, assuming you can get past the security guards.’

‘You’ve changed your tune, haven’t you?’ John Paul said.

‘Listen to the three of us,’ Greg said. ‘Our whole conversation is all about these people now. It’s probably the same at every other table.’

‘Let’s choose our dessert,’ John Paul said. ‘How about Double Delights all round, and espressos to finish off with?’

Double Delight came in two small but delicious parts: first, fine leaves of bitter chocolate with custard cream and praline sauce, then Crepes Suzette with vanilla ice cream and orange peel. The dessert was accompanied by a glass of Hennessy Cognac.

Just as Greg and Chloe were nodding approvingly at John Paul’s choice, they heard raised voices at the celebrity table. Dosh was jabbing her finger at Dominic, her face frighteningly contorted.

‘Bloody hell, she’s not happy,’ John Paul said. ‘Maybe someone asked her to actually pay for something. They’ve probably called the paramedics.’

They all watched, morbidly fascinated. Dominic seemed to be apologising profusely. A manager had appeared and was speaking with Dosh.

Seconds later, Dominic was back at the friends’ table, taking their dessert order. His sparkle had completely vanished.

‘Hey, what happened over there, man?’ John Paul asked. ‘We noticed there was a bit of a stramash.’

‘I made a mistake. I said to Dosh that maybe we should have three condiments on her table. Salt, pepper and gold flakes.’

‘Gold flakes?’ Chloe said.

‘Yeah, you know, so that she could sprinkle them over her food and make it sparkle.’

‘That’s a great idea,’ Greg said. ‘Right up her street, surely.’

‘She thought I was insulting her. She claimed I was making some sort of reference to her poor childhood, being brought up by a single mother and all that.’

‘Boy, she wasn’t half having a go,’ Chloe said.

‘It was the worst experience of my life’

The manager arrived and whispered to Dominic. He was then led back to Dosh’s table.

They all watched to see what would happen. Dosh jabbed at Dominic again, and the manager nodded. Dosh seemed to launch into an extended rant. Then she started laughing, and the others at the table sniggered.

Dominic was being subjected to a ritual humiliation as far as Greg could make out. Dosh eventually dismissed him with a flick of her wrist. The manager took him to one side again and seemed to give him a dressing down.

Dominic went to the kitchen then came out and disappeared into the staff toilet for a few minutes. He reappeared, went back to the kitchen and emerged with a silver tray bearing three Double Delights and three espressos that he distributed amongst the friends. His hands were shaking.

‘Everything OK?’ Greg asked.

‘I’m not having a good night.’ Dominic’s face was pale.

‘What happened with Dosh, if you don’t mind my asking?’ Chloe said.

‘She insisted I was replaced as the waiter.’ Dominic’s face flashed with anger. ‘She said she could buy and sell me a million times over.’

‘That’s appalling.’ Greg couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘Why don’t you complain?’

‘And lose my job? I don’t think so. I really need the money.’

‘You can’t let her get away with it,’ John Paul said.

‘You can’t beat these people. If I rile them, they could ruin my life. I mean, seriously ruin it.’

‘You could go to the papers,’ Chloe said.

‘No way. Dosh’s PR machine would chew me up. These people can do

whatever they like. They're untouchable.' He shook his head. 'Anyway, I'll need to look busy. I don't want to piss off my manager even more. Would you like anything else? I recommend a Bonnie Prince Charlie coffee. It's hot coffee, Drambuie, and a teaspoon of sugar, with thick cream floated on top. A real treat. Like a fancy Irish coffee.'

The friends looked at each other and smiled.

'Who could resist?' Chloe said. 'Enjoy now, pay later.'

'That's the spirit.' Dominic rustled up a half-hearted smile. 'Maybe I'll win some bonus points from the boss.'

Greg wished Dominic good luck.

'I appreciate it,' Dominic replied. 'Why can't everyone be like you guys?' Off he went.

The friends spent the next few minutes slagging off Dosh. John Paul said that he felt like going over to say something to her.

Dominic soon returned with the three special coffees, but kept sneaking glances at Dosh's table.

'Don't blame yourself,' John Paul said. 'It was a celebrity having a strop. Nothing unusual about that.'

'My manager's looking over. I better go.' Dominic walked away.

'Poor man,' Chloe said, taking her first sip of her Bonnie Prince Charlie. 'Mmmm, this is delish.'

'It's such an easy life for Dosh,' John Paul said. 'Remember that scandal last year when she got nominated for a book award for a book she didn't write? Isn't that incredible? Someone else writes a book, she gets her name and picture on the front cover and then some bright spark thinks she deserves an award. I mean how difficult is it to have your photo taken?'

'Money goes to money, doesn't it?' Greg said. 'The more you have, the more people throw at you. Dosh gathers it up as though it's fallen from a money tree. It's effortless. She must find the whole idea of work quite bizarre.'

'Work is only for the little people, right?' Chloe said.

'Maybe we should just walk over to Dosh and give her our money right now,' Greg said, 'because it's going to end up there anyway.'

They finished off their drinks. Greg signalled to Dominic for the bill. Chloe offered cash, and the two men used their credit cards. They made sure Dominic got a healthy tip.

'Cheers, guys,' Dominic said.

'You're looking a bit off colour,' Chloe said.

'I don't feel too well.' Dominic turned and left again.

'I need more alcohol,' Greg said. 'Come on, let's hit the bar.'

While John Paul and Chloe found a leather sofa in the corner, Greg headed for the bar. It was busy, with many people trying to attract the attention of two overworked bar tenders. Men were waving twenty pound notes, girls were pouting furiously, and newcomers kept pushing in.

The barmen didn't look once at Greg. After a couple of minutes, he began to imagine he was wearing a cloak of invisibility. The guy on his right got served, and the girl on the left, but not him. He hated queuing at bars. He was the mug who always missed out. Not pushy enough, not mouthy enough, not enough of an operator. Someone pushed in beside him and he groaned. *Fuck it.* Then he realised it was Black Beauty. He tried to catch her eye, but she was looking in the other direction. The closest barman saw her and immediately went to serve her, but she nodded in Greg's direction and said, 'I think this guy was before me.'

Greg gave her a clumsy, grateful smile then instantly felt pathetic. He ordered three Zombie cocktails, but only after a long hesitation in which he almost forgot what he was ordering. Then he got tongue-tied, mispronouncing Zombie as 'Thombie'. He felt Black Beauty's eyes on him, and could tell she was distinctly unimpressed. When he paid for the drinks with his credit card, he thought for a terrible moment that it was going to be rejected.

He took his three drinks and pushed his way through the throng. Passing a door marked *Staff*, he heard raised voices. He stopped for a moment, shocked by the vehemence of one voice. Dominic's manager was having a go at him again, calling him 'a fucking idiot', telling him that he was unfit to work in a classy restaurant. 'I'm furious,' the manager yelled. 'You've humiliated me in front of my best customers.'

The door swung open and another waiter emerged, looking sheepish. Greg caught sight of Dominic in the background. His face was taut with a mixture of fury and shame.

Greg hurried away. He hated seeing people at their lowest point. There was nothing worse than a man being humiliated by a manager. All managers were jerks. It was part of the job description. He'd done his Mars Bars routine precisely because he could tell it would happen to him if he'd hung around in that call centre for any length of time. He hastened back to Chloe and John Paul and gave them their Zombies cocktails, trying to forget what he'd seen with Dominic.

'What is in this?' John Paul squinted at the orange-coloured drink.

'It's, er, let me think – white rum, golden rum, dark rum, cherry brandy, apple, orange, lime and papaya juice, a dash of syrup and strong Demerara rum. They reckon that if you overindulge in these things you turn into an, um, zombie.'

'Love it,' Chloe said.

Greg sat back and sipped his cocktail, but he kept thinking of Dominic. He told Chloe and John Paul what he'd seen.

'That's terrible,' Chloe said. 'Do you think he's going to get fired?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Shouldn't we speak up for him?' John Paul said. 'We all thought he did a fantastic job.'

‘The manager won’t listen to us,’ Greg said. ‘We don’t have any clout.’ He frowned. ‘Fuck it, I need some fresh air. I’ll be back in a minute.’

He put down his drink, got up from the sofa and went outside, pushing past the paparazzi camped at the entrance. He crossed the road and stood in a doorway. It was a freezing night, the paparazzi all wearing thick jackets to keep warm. Greg shivered in his tuxedo. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he found the card he was given that afternoon by the demonstrator. He brought it out and stared at it. There was something almost tangible about the blankness on both sides. If Dominic were a somebody, no one would have spoken to him like that. But he was just a waiter. You either have a name or you don’t, and if you don’t, you’re fucked. The LLN were right.

He noticed that a guy selling first editions of Sunday’s newspapers was setting up a stall. Bundles of newspapers were stacked behind him. A boy with a bobble hat and a Parka was cutting the strings round the bundles then placing the papers on the stall for his boss to sell.

Greg wandered over and stared at the headlines. *Dosh & Rex Targeted by Sinister Cult*, the *News of the Week* proclaimed. He scanned the paragraph underneath: ‘The so-called League for the Liberation of Nobodies has announced that celebrities and the super rich should watch out. People like Dosh and Rex will have to face a new reality, they say. A spokesman for the obscure group, which police have described as a “cult” and which held a major demonstration in Hoxton on Saturday, said that their goal is to give everyone a name.’

The newspaper boy put up a board that said, ‘It’s official: Nobody likes Dosh and Rex.’ He saw Greg staring at him. ‘Hey, mister, are you a nobody?’ he asked cheekily.

Greg didn’t answer. A van drew up and a man threw out a new bundle of newspapers that landed with a thump behind the boy. *The Sunday Sentinel’s* headline attracted Greg’s attention immediately.

‘Billionaire slain. Sir Henry Laybury’s corpse found by police in garden shed.’

5

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Thomas Rankin glared at his audience of journalists and reporters. It was Sunday morning and he disliked working at the weekend. Everyone needs a chance to unwind. But there he was having to feed the media monster with its insatiable 24/7 appetite. It never digested its food, and it never cleared the gore from the corners of its lips as it chewed on any fresh morsel that came its way.

Rankin shuffled his notes to give him a moment to weigh his words. ‘Yes, we can confirm that Sir Henry Laybury died in the same way as Anatoli Kranovic and Gregori Shilepov. Post mortems confirmed that the

three victims were strangled. A machine needle was used to inscribe symbols on the chest and back of the victims. Although the symbols are of similar design, they are different in each case. We haven't been able to establish their meaning at this time. However, we have been advised they are nothing to do with the so-called Russian mafia. We have commissioned experts from GCHQ and Cambridge University to study the signs. We haven't established any formal links in business or personal terms between the three victims.'

'So, you have no leads at all?' someone yelled.

'We have several lines of enquiry, but it's not my job to speculate.'

'But you're holding stuff back, aren't you?' another voice said. 'All three bodies were found in a deserted location: a disused warehouse, an abandoned outhouse and a derelict shed on an allotment. They were ritualistically branded with indecipherable symbols and their bodies were skinned, and the flesh hung from meat hooks. A search of the crime scene failed to detect any useful forensic evidence...'

'Stop there,' Rankin said. 'Some of you have reported that the killer or killers may have worn the sort of protective clothing that emergency services use when dealing with hazardous materials, including special gloves and breathing equipment. These, you have said, would leave no traces, especially in relation to DNA. No fingerprints, no footprints, not even the contents of a human breath. It all makes wonderful copy, but it's pure speculation. And contrary to various rumours, no CCTV cameras were located anywhere near the crime scenes. Witnesses last saw Sir Henry Laybury at 2 am and his body was discovered by accident at 8 am by a man walking his dog past allotments. We're looking for any witnesses to Sir Henry's movements after 2 am. He was a wealthy man and may have made enemies on his rise to the top. We are in the process of interviewing all of his business contacts.'

'Why did you take so long to release the news of Sir Henry's death?'

'We needed to inform his son first. He and Sir Henry were estranged.' Rankin coughed and took a sip of water. 'I appeal for anyone who can supply us with possible motives regarding these horrific murders to come forward.'

'What about the League for the Liberation of Nobodies?' a voice shouted.

'I beg your pardon?'

'They've issued threats against celebrities and the super rich, haven't they? They've specifically mentioned Dosh and Rex. Are they next in line?'

The Commissioner frowned. 'Let me turn you over to Deputy Assistant Simon Greest. He can bring you up to speed with the particular group you mentioned.'

'The League for the Liberation of Nobodies is a new group that shrouds itself in secrecy,' Greest said. 'Their leadership structure is difficult to identify. No one actively claims to be the leader. It's true that they are campaigning against the most prominent figures in our society, but they have made no explicit threats of violence. As far as we can ascertain at this time,

they are simply trying to highlight the media world's obsession with a small number of rich, powerful and famous individuals.

'Until now, no one has suggested any link between them and the deaths of the three victims. Of course, we are keeping open minds, but our assessment at this stage is that there's no connection.' He brought his microphone closer. 'I was in charge of the policing for yesterday's march held by the League in Hoxton. We deployed extra officers in case of trouble, but the event passed off without incident. The marchers did not create any disturbances. They restricted their protest to handing out blank cards, and were respectful of others at all times.'

'I think those are enough questions for now,' Rankin said.

As the Commissioner and Deputy Assistant were rising to their feet, a woman asked, 'What about John Galt's Golden Barge event?'

'What about it?' Rankin said.

'It's the biggest event of the year. Many of the richest and most famous people in the world will be there. There will be plenty of billionaires.'

'All the policing for this prestigious event is in place,' Rankin said. 'It will be thorough but discreet.'

'Isn't it true that you're attending the event? You're a personal friend of John Galt, aren't you?'

Rankin frowned. 'Even I deserve to see my friends from time to time.'

6

Greg didn't crawl out of bed until 1 pm on Sunday, yet he was still tired. A shower didn't help. He dragged himself along to the grocery shop in Hoxton High Street. Maybe he'd buy a newspaper if he could bear reading one. Last night's lurid headlines were still fresh in his mind.

In the shop, with its claustrophobically narrow aisles, Greg gazed at the front pages of the array of scandal rags. They presented the usual toxic cocktail of sleazy businessmen having sex with prostitutes dressed as secretaries or school girls, family-values politicians confessing that they were either gay or sleeping with their teenage researchers, kiss-and-tell girls doing the telling part of their job and collecting their fat cheques.

Greg rarely bought a newspaper. The front cover was usually more than enough. He frowned, paid for his groceries and left. It was another cold, grey, dreary day. A classic February washout. He plodded along the High Street, stifling yawns, and found himself outside the empty shop with that strange sign in the window. It was called *Zero*. How appropriate. A nothing shop with nothing in it.

'Hey, man, how's it going?' a voice said.

Greg turned and saw Dominic approaching. 'I didn't realise you lived in Hoxton.'

'I don't,' Dominic said. 'I'm from Clapham.'

'How did it go last night?'

'What do you think?' Dominic made a chopping motion. 'The Dosh axe came down on my neck. I got fired at the end of the night.'

'It's not fair. If only people like us could fight back somehow.'

'Isn't that why we're here?'

'Sorry?'

Dominic pointed at the shop. 'Aren't you here for the meet?' He took a scrap of paper from his back pocket, a printout of a Facebook web page. It read:

Does nobody care? Is nobody helping? Is nobody doing anything? The League for the Liberation of Nobodies says it's time to start the fight back. Meet today at Zero, 11 Hoxton High Street, 1.30 pm.

Dominic narrowed his eyes and looked up and down the street. 'A couple of years ago I was in the Territorial Army – just to get fit, really – but I was excellent on the rifle range. I got a marksman rating. I'd love to put a picture of Dosh's face on the target at the shooting range and get to work with my rifle. Talk about dead rich. That bitch would know all about it.'

'That's a bit extreme.'

'Yeah, I'm only joking.' Dominic opened the door of the empty shop. 'Are you coming in?'

Greg shook his head.

'But I thought you'd come for the meet.'

'No, I live just round the corner.'

'Well, why don't you come anyway? We need as many people as we can get. Thousands have signed up for the campaign already. The word is out.'

'I'm not really into politics.'

'What have you got to lose?'

'Listen, maybe some other time.' Greg stretched out his hand. 'All the best, Dominic. I hope everything works out.'

Dominic quickly broke off the handshake and disappeared inside.

When Greg got home, his next-door neighbour was blasting out music: a pounding hip hop song about gangstas, ho's and bad boys blasting cops with booming semiautomatics. The walls of Greg's apartment were vibrating. He'd never got on well with his neighbour. She was a chavvy 19-yr-old blonde with a taste for knock-off designer miniskirts, and she regularly had different blokes coming back to stay.

Greg went round to Chloe and John Paul's apartments, hoping to round up a vigilante posse. No reply. He rapped on the door of the chav, hoping, against the odds, to have a rational discussion with her.

A guy with a white vest, big muscles, loads of tattoos and a shaved head appeared. 'Yeah?' the guy shouted over the noise.

'The music's a bit loud,' Greg said.

'I like it loud, mate.' The guy stood there, half grinning, half snarling, looking Greg up and down. A *want some?* expression was fixed on his face. 'Are we done?' he said after a moment.

'I don't want any trouble. Please turn the music down.'

The guy smirked. 'Two things, mate. We both know I'm not going to, and we both know you're not going to do anything about.' He pushed his face towards Greg's, his stained teeth making Greg feel queasy. 'You know why? Because you're a fucking nobody.'

The words sliced through Greg. As he turned and retreated to his apartment, the guy laughed at him.

Greg slammed his door shut behind him. The music from next door got even louder. He stood in front of the full-length mirror next to his bed, while the floorboards and walls reverberated. Raising his hands, he clamped them over his ears. Jesus fucking Christ. He stared at himself. A *nobody*. There was no denying it. Would his whole life be like this? Moronic thugs bossing him around, rich people walking over him. He was condemned to being the puppet that prayed it would never see the strings. Because then it would have to admit the truth.

He went to his hi fi system and put on Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. He cranked up the volume to max, but instantly had to press his hands against his ears, worried he might burst his eardrums. He stopped the CD with the remote control.

What do you do when the music's over? It was time to change his life. It was time for *Zero*.

7

Greg walked fast, the noise of his neighbour's hip hop music still taunting him. He feared he might hear that music for the rest of his life, like tinnitus. As he sped past the local café, he clocked Chloe and John Paul sitting in a window booth, tucking into some greasy food. He went inside, pushed in beside John Paul in the way that he imagined the shaven-headed thug would do, and reached over and plucked a fried sausage from his plate.

'Hey, hands off, rude lad,' John Paul grunted.

John Paul and Chloe were having the café's £4.99 special: All Day Breakfast – fried egg, sausages, bacon, black pudding, tomato, buttered toast, accompanied by a pot of tea.

'Junk food heaven,' Greg said, munching on his stolen sausage. 'Is this your hangover cure?'

'Damn straight,' Chloe said with a wink. Today she was wearing skinny jeans, a Breton T-shirt, a blue leather jerkin and a blue beret. She looked gloriously eccentric.

‘What’s the story?’ John Paul said.

‘Our local chavette is up to her usual tricks.’

‘Which chavette?’ Chloe asked. ‘There are so many to choose from.’

‘The one in 3B. She’s got a chav superman round there giving her one, and playing his music as loud as he can.’

‘So, it’s the bedspring concerto, the rumpy pumpy serenade, the screaming banshees’ weekend screamathon?’

‘No, it’s the hip hop hammer drill. The thud thud, clunk clunk, fuck you fuck the world gangsta soundtrack.’

‘Don’t you just love it?’ Chloe grinned.

‘So it won’t be safe to go home for a while?’ John Paul said. ‘What shall we do instead?’

‘Fancy doing something crazy?’ Greg asked. ‘Let’s go to that weird shop we saw yesterday. I bumped into Dominic – you know the waiter from last night. He was going in.’

‘What happened to him last night?’ Chloe asked.

‘Fired.’

‘Shit,’ John Paul banged down his knife and fork.

‘Poor guy.’ Chloe frowned.

‘So, shall we all go along to the League’s magic door and see what happens when we open it?’

‘Why not?’ Chloe said. ‘Might be fun.’

‘OK,’ John Paul agreed. ‘But we’re leaving fast if it’s rubbish.’

‘Are we doing it?’ Greg squinted at the black door. He was strangely nervous, as though he were about to embark on a particularly tricky audition.

‘We’re doing it,’ Chloe and John Paul chorused.

Greg turned the knob, pushed open the door and squeezed inside. To the left was the empty shop visible from the window, and in front was a short, black-painted corridor with another door at the far end.

When the three friends opened the second door, they found themselves in an impressive courtyard with wide, sandy flagstones. Several metres further on was a small, elegant bridge crossing a picturesque canal, and then more flagstones on the other side, leading to a big warehouse with walls made of neat, clean, brown bricks. It was a beautiful little scene, and completely unexpected since it was so close to Hoxton’s grotty main street.

‘Wow,’ Chloe said. ‘It reminds me of *The Secret Garden*. I loved that book.’

‘I didn’t know Hoxton had a canal.’ Greg scratched his head.

‘I think I know what this place is,’ John Paul said. ‘I remember reading in the local paper a while back that someone was refurbishing an old sugar refinery. This must be it.’

The three crossed the bridge and arrived at the warehouse's arched wooden door, resembling something from an old castle. They tried to open it, but it was firmly locked. John Paul pointed up at a CCTV camera overlooking the door and Chloe pressed an intercom buzzer. After a moment there was a click. Greg tried the door again and this time pushed it open without difficulty. The three entered the warehouse and came to the foot of a glass spiral staircase.

'I feel like Cinderella,' Chloe said.

They went up the steps, passing a number of LCD screens built into the glass walls. Each screen showed a different person saying, 'My name is...' followed by a long pause and then, '...and I am a nobody.'

'Is it supposed to be like Alcoholics Anonymous?' Chloe asked. 'Maybe they have their own twelve step programme.'

They found a room with wooden floorboards and bare brick walls. A poster on one wall said, 'Disappointed with life? Dissatisfied? Is life passing you by?' Two mirrored doors stood at the far end, side by side. One had a sign over it saying, **Somebody** and the other, **Nobody**.

Greg desperately wanted to go through the Somebody door.

'This is bullshit,' John Paul said. 'How could anyone choose to go through the Nobody door? Anyone who does is fucked.' His face was turning red. 'It's probably rich City cunts behind all of this. I bet they're laughing at the meatheads going through the Nobody door. This was a bad idea. Come on, let's get out of Dodge City.' He stormed towards the Somebody door, pushed it open then vanished.

Greg and Chloe looked at each other.

'We'd better go after him,' Chloe said.

Greg shook his head. 'I want to find out what this is all about.'

'I guess we'll see you later then.' Chloe smiled awkwardly. 'No Prince Charming for me after all.'

'I suppose not.' Greg reached out and gripped her arm. 'Sure you don't want to stay?' Even as he said it, he felt his grip easing. He knew what her answer would be.

Chloe paused then smiled awkwardly. 'No, better not. See you back at base.'

Greg watched her follow John Paul through the Somebody door. He heard footsteps and figured there must be another staircase beyond the door, probably leading to an exit door and back to normality. Or were John Paul and Chloe being welcomed into a special room because they'd chosen to label themselves as Somebodies? Maybe that was the right choice. Maybe the whole thing was a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Somebodies and the Nobodies selected themselves in life. Maybe John Paul was right and you were fucked if you chose the Nobody door.

He stared at his reflection in the mirrored Nobody door. The word Nobody was flashing in his mind. Was that what he was? *Really* was. No

more bullshit. He continued to stare at the mirror. The mirror of reality. He saw a nobody reflected back. 'My name is...' he said aloud, like the LCD faces he'd seen on the way up. He didn't give his name, just as they hadn't. '...and I am a nobody.'

He walked across the room, took a deep breath and pushed open the Nobody door. He closed his eyes as he walked through. For a moment, he imagined that a trapdoor would open and he'd plunge into a stifling black hole. Or maybe he'd have to crawl on his belly through sewers. They'd dismantle what little was left of his self respect by subjecting him to hell. He'd learn exactly what it meant to be one of the damned. Instead, what he saw when he opened his eyes was a large room with wooden church pews. About a hundred people were there. Most were silent, while a few chatted in whispered voices. Dominic was near the back. He waved as soon as he saw Greg.

'Good to see you, man,' he said when Greg sat beside him. 'People like us have to stick together.'

'Nobodies, you mean?'

Dominic smiled.

'So, what are we waiting for?'

'You got here just in time. They're about to show a movie. It will explain everything, apparently.'

'I can't see anyone who looks like they're in charge.'

'A woman made an announcement half an hour ago. She said we should spend the time contemplating our status as nobodies.'

Someone coughed and Greg looked up. A young, skinny guy in blue overalls was gazing down at him. The guy had a shaved head and nondescript face. He resembled a photo fit of Mr Average. He was carrying a small wooden platform and he gestured to Greg to put his feet on it. Greg glanced at Dominic.

'Part of the service,' Dominic whispered. 'He does this for everyone.'

'Does what?'

'Um, shines their shoes.'

'No,' Greg said, but the guy was already crouching down and setting to work on Greg's brogues. Greg tried to swing his feet away, but the guy stopped him.

'This has to be done,' the guy said. 'You'll understand shortly.'

Greg reluctantly let him get on with it.

The shoe shiner made no attempt to speak to Greg or make eye contact. Greg couldn't understand why such a degrading task was being performed here of all places. The guy finished, stood up and started to shuffle away. He was like the most pathetic guy on earth. Greg grabbed his arm. 'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.' The guy withdrew to one of the corners of the room then just stood there, back against the wall, head bowed. The Invisible Man, Greg thought. There he was, right in front of everyone, yet somehow not

there at all.

The walls of the warehouse room were dotted with plasma screens. The people masterminding this operation clearly weren't on Skid Row. Maybe John Paul was right and it was just a joke by rich City boys.

The others who had turned up were exactly what you would get if you went out into a high street and randomly scooped up a hundred people. There were even three or four people who looked distinctly well off, in fashionable designer suits. What they were wearing told one story, but their strained faces showed another. Maybe even some rich people felt like nobodies.

Two girls in the front pew turned round and waved at Greg. He recognised them immediately: Becky and Olivia, two struggling fellow thespians. They'd bumped into each other at a few auditions – unsuccessful ones, naturally – and shared the same forced smiles and jolly expressions of 'better luck next time.' Greg wasn't surprised to find them here. In fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if the place were full of unemployed actors. He was about to go for a chat with the girls when the plasma screens flicked into action. They showed the closing scenes of *Apocalypse Now*.

A message appeared on the screens, superimposed over the pictures of burning jungle. It read, 'This is about watching the movie of your life as you die.' Then Jim Morrison's Californian rock star voice – soft, seductive and sad – spoke over the pictures. Morrison said – and the words imprinted themselves on Greg's mind:

'Well, we're all in the cosmic movie, you know that. That means the day you die you have to watch your whole life recurring eternally forever, in Cinemascope, 3D. So you better have some good incidents happening in there, and a fitting climax.'

Morrison's message was repeated three more times. In the first repetition, his voice was given a spooky echo, in the second it was quiet and slow, in the last it was practically being shouted. After a long pause, slogans flashed up over the onscreen flames.

**Zero Day: the end of celebrity is coming.
Zero Day: the end of the super rich.
Zero Day: the end of the masters of the universe.
Zero Day: the end of the Old World Order.**

**The dawn of the Nobody.
The rise of Nothing.
The triumph of No One.**

The invisible will be seen, the forgotten remembered, the discarded embraced. You are not alone. We are not alone. We are the Plan.

**The League for the Liberation of Nobodies.
The League for the Liberation of Nobodies.
The League for the Liberation of Nobodies.
LLN LLN LLN LLN LLN LLN LLN LLN**

A recording of a live version of The Doors' epic song *The End* was played, accompanied by a single flashing slogan: **Fade to Black.**

The whole thing was surreal, and totally inspiring. Greg wanted a revolution there and then. He saw in everyone else's eyes that they were feeling the same. He wanted everything to change.

A blonde girl appeared from a door at the far end of the room. Her hair was in a ponytail and she wore a black pencil skirt, a white blouse, black tights and black stilettos. Greg was taken aback by how corporate she looked.

'Thank you all for coming,' she said in quite a posh voice. 'We hope you enjoyed our movie. I am here to speak on behalf of the League for the Liberation of Nobodies – the LLN.' She gestured at the shoeshine guy, still standing in the corner. 'Tom, here, shined all of your shoes. Most of you barely acknowledged his existence. You didn't make eye contact. You were awkward and uncomfortable when he was near you. Only one of you thanked him. Would that person like to stand up?'

Greg got to his feet, not feeling proud in any way.

'A round of applause,' the LLN girl said.

Polite applause rippled around the room, but quickly died. Greg smiled weakly at the shoe shiner and then sat down again.

'The shoe shine task was a deliberate ploy,' the LLN girl said. 'Even though all of you had the courage to come through the Nobody door, you showed that you still operate in the world of somebodies. You viewed Tom as someone lesser than you, lower in status, not worth knowing. You didn't even look at him.

'Everything you thought and felt about Tom is what the somebodies think and feel about you. Tom deserved to be treated like a human being, and so do you in the world of somebodies.' She turned and smiled at Tom. 'Take a good look. He's a real person with intrinsic worth. Don't sneer at him just because he makes his living shining shoes.

'You must eliminate the status-obsessed element of your character. That's what the somebodies rely on. They use it to divide and rule us. While we play the status game, the somebodies always win because they're at the top of the status tree. Our liberty and happiness lie in a status-free world. So, what do we have to do? We must learn a new game. As the deconstructionists like to say, we have to de-centre the narrative. At the moment, the wealthy are the centre of the narrative, and we are squeezed in the margins. But the rich are nothing without us. We must centre the narrative around ourselves.'

Greg sat there, hardly knowing what to think. He was inspired by what

the LLN girl said, but was it possible? Didn't we dance to the wealthy man's tune – his booming fifth symphony of riches and power – because there was no alternative?

'Some of you may feel at this point that this is not for you,' the LLN girl said. 'If so, feel free to leave. For those of you who are still keen to find out what we are proposing, we have two coaches waiting outside to take you to our next destination. We apologise for the cloak and dagger tactics, but we have a particular way of doing things. It sorts the wheat from the chaff. Now, if you want to get on the coaches, come with me.'

'Where are you taking us?' someone shouted. 'How far is it?'

'It's the furthest journey imaginable,' she answered with an enigmatic smile. 'From not having a life to having the time of your life.'

No one bailed out. The entire group got up and left the room through the door at the far end and followed the secretary along a corridor. They passed a room with an opaque door and matching opaque walls. Greg could make out shapes inside – people sitting at a table, talking quietly.

They reached another spiral staircase, leading down to ground level.

'Who were those people back there?' Dominic asked.

'They are the founders of our movement,' the secretary said.

'Can't we see them?'

'Sorry, no. For security reasons, you understand. It's safer for them and for you. When you're setting out to defeat the Old World Order, you can't be too careful. This is the biggest fight imaginable: a one-time chance to make humanity into what it should always have been. Don't imagine that the rich and famous won't fight to the end to stop us. This is the final battle for the soul of humanity.'

8

Greg sat next to Dominic, half way up the first coach. All the blinds were pulled down and the driver told everyone not to attempt to look outside.

'That was mind-blowing back there,' Dominic said. 'Not a single person walked out. You can feel the change in the air, can't you?'

Greg wasn't sure if Dominic was talking this thing up, or if he really meant it. But wasn't he feeling it too? He was almost scared to acknowledge it, but maybe he was about to have that thing that people always talked about but which never seemed to happen: *a life-changing experience*. 'It was radical,' he said to Dominic.

He sat back and made himself comfortable, but one thing was spooking him – those people in that office. OK, it was important to be secretive, but surely not to hide yourself from your own supporters. It made them seem remote, even sinister. Don't you have to look someone in the eye before you can truly believe them?

An LCD screen was fitted to the back of each seat. As soon as the coach got started, the screens came on. Bizarrely, a choir of angels appeared, singing a Gregorian chant. Greg swapped a puzzled glance with Dominic. Then the picture switched to BBC's *News 24*.

A newsreader said, 'Excitement is mounting about an archaeological dig in Iran. Rumours are spreading that excavations have yielded irrefutable proof that one of the most famous Biblical stories is true. A contact close to the archaeological team said that humanity's eyes would be opened and we would see a new reality.'

'The leader of the expedition, Professor John Vernay, has refrained from speaking to the media at this time, insisting he will make an announcement in the near future when his work has been completed. He has asked for patience and understanding. Security guards have now sealed off the site. Throughout the world, religious fever is spreading. Hundreds of thousands have flocked to St Peter's Square in Rome, and the Pope has addressed the crowd and announced that the time of miracles is at hand. He has asked everyone to pray.'

The picture switched to two men in sober suits in a studio, discussing world stock markets. One of them seemed agitated and his eyes were darting around. 'This is unprecedented,' he said. 'Someone is making the biggest bet in history. It amounts to a prediction that global stock markets will collapse within the next four weeks. The world economy is, according to this bet, on the brink of meltdown. It's all to do with something called *shorting*.'

His colleague laughed nervously. 'Global collapse? That's a bit drastic. Can you explain what shorting is?'

'OK, what happens is that, for a fee, major shareholders in big companies lend their shares to interested parties for a specified period of time. The interested parties then sell these shares on the market. By the end of the agreed period, the interested parties have to give back all the shares they borrowed. So, if they're going to make money, the shorters need the price of the borrowed shares to drop – preferably by a fistful of dollars – so that when the time comes for them to return the shares to the lenders, they can buy back the appropriate amount from the market for a cheaper price than they sold them. They can then pocket a tidy profit.'

'But what if the share price doesn't go down?'

The first speaker smiled. 'Well, in that case, the shorters make a loss, maybe a big one. That's why it's a gamble.'

'So, somebody, or some group of people are betting the farm that the stock market crash to beat all stock market crashes is on the way?'

'More like they're betting everyone's farm. This is the mother of all gambles. The people behind this move must be astoundingly rich and have balls of steel, if you'll pardon the expression.'

'Do you think they know something we don't?'

'Perhaps. Or it might be the biggest fraud in history. Maybe in the next

few weeks we'll see several very rich guys in designer suits having handcuffs snapped on their wrists by FBI agents.'

'Or we'll see a stock market catastrophe and unprecedented global financial instability.'

'Well, yes, I'm afraid so.'

'Any ideas about who's behind these incredible shorting moves?'

'No one has a clue. The authorities certainly don't know. From what I can gather, a whole web of offshore companies with numerous subsidiaries and layered shells is involved, making heavy use of secretive Swiss bank accounts to move money around. Hedge funds have piled in too. It's fiendishly elaborate and it would take years for the world's top forensic accountants to unravel it all. Although I've emphasised shorting, it's not the only ingredient involved in this financial manoeuvre. There's a whole array of complex spread bets, all gambling on stocks falling precipitously, and there are also intricate derivatives shenanigans that will result in huge payouts to certain companies if other companies default on debt repayments. As I say, only a financial genius could sort through all of this.'

'Well, gosh, all I can tell our viewers is to watch this space, and hold on to your hats. A perfect storm coming might be heading our way.'

Again, the choir of angels appeared.

Greg and Dominic looked at each other. Everyone in the coach seemed bewildered and started whispering.

'Looks like the shit's about to hit the fan big time.' Dominic's eyes were gleaming. 'Man, I'd love to see all of the rich cunts jumping out of skyscrapers when their investments bomb.'

'Is all of this true?' Greg frowned. 'Maybe it's been made up to freak us out.'

'It's straight up,' Dominic insisted. He was about to add something when he stopped and pointed at the screen. None other than Dosh and Rex had appeared, pictured entering the very restaurant where Dominic was fired. They were shown in slow motion, making their way through the paparazzi in a blaze of camera flashes. The images were accompanied by the voice of Jim Morrison, talking about not being able to 'petition the lord with prayer,' followed by a raging live version of the Doors' song *Break on Through*. Morrison was ranting about fat cats with top hats, dead rats, people thinking they were aristocrats. 'Crap,' Morrison yelled over the music, 'that's crap.'

'Yeah,' Dominic said, 'it's crap all right.' His eyes shone with hate. The onscreen images showed a montage of idyllic scenes from the Maldives, high points from the careers of Dosh and Rex, pictures of adoring crowds, screaming girls and slaving boys, hyperventilating reporters making hyperbolic statements. The Doors' song faded out and R.E.M.'s jangly song *Shiny Happy People* then accompanied the images.

The R.E.M. song soon gave way to another song, but one Greg didn't recognise. Seemingly called *Perfect Game*, it was about a guy without a

name being forced to play a game run by perfect criminals. The reason it was perfect was that only they could win. It fitted the pictures perfectly. There were images of caviar, gold, diamonds, cheering crowds, close-ups of Dosh and Rex, all interspersed with screens full of financial information about the two celebrities, showing their annual income, total career earnings, hourly rate for making public appearances, also broken down into how much they made per minute and second, and how much they earned in interest each day. It showed what they were paid for giving interviews, making after-dinner speeches, endorsing various products, putting their names to books they hadn't written, and so on. The numbers were astronomical. Underneath, ticker tape ran along the screen saying. 'Thou art the Lord, my God, and I shall worship only thee. There is no God but God.'

Finally, a man appeared in a studio, his back to the camera. He stood in front of a screen, and used a pointer to highlight various things.

'Here we see Dosh with her pet Tasmanian Devil,' He pointed at archive footage of Dosh walking along a red carpet with a bizarre little creature on a leash. 'She calls it Terry.' The images were replaced with a scene inside a luxury mansion, with Dosh and Rex being introduced to a man in an immaculately tailored suit. 'Here we see the golden couple being introduced to the world's richest man – John Galt, currently worth one hundred and twenty-five billion pounds and rising. Mr Galt paid Rex two hundred thousand pounds to have a half hour kick-about with Galt's nephew on his fourth birthday.'

The speaker didn't turn round so there was no chance to see his face. The video closed with R.E.M.'s *Losing my Religion* playing over a sequence of slime, rats, insects, derelict homes, deserts, flies, people dying in Africa, and the repeated chanting of the names Dosh and Rex over an African drumbeat. Celebrities with dazzling smiles morphed into sharks devouring prey in the oceans. It was hard to keep watching. And then the screens went blank.

No one in the coach spoke. Greg was sure no one had any idea what was going on. He certainly didn't. The odd thing was that the video hadn't spoken about any particular course of action. No politician had appeared to denounce the rich and their obscene lifestyles. Not a word.

The driver announced that they would be arriving at their destination in fifteen minutes. A new video appeared on the screens.

'Look, it's Minack Theatre,' Greg said. He'd once done a play there when he was a student. Set on the Cornish coast, it was a scenic amphitheatre overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It was the most spectacular setting for a theatre, and it gave Greg a huge charge of energy when he acted there. That same energy was palpable on the video. It was sunset, and an actor dressed in black with a fantastic, resonant voice was addressing an audience in white.

'The heaviest burden,' the actor began. 'What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: "This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times

without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence – and in the same way this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and in the same way this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence will be turned again and again – and you with it, you dust of dust!” – Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: “You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!” If this thought gained power over you it would, as you are now, transform and perhaps crush you; the question in all and everything: “do you want this again and again, times without number?” would lie as the heaviest burden upon all of your actions. Or how well disposed towards yourself and towards life would you have to become to have *no greater desire* than this for the ultimate eternal sanction and seal?”

The actor paused then said, three times, ‘The ultimate eternal sanction and seal.’ He stopped and the Minack Theatre audience rose to their feet, clapping wildly.

A voiceover in an American accent said, ‘We are the League for the Liberation of Nobodies and we endorse this message by Friedrich Nietzsche.’ Then, with the camera showing the sea and the rocks around Minack Theatre as the sun disappeared, the Doors’ *When the Music’s Over* played over the images.

‘I get it,’ Dominic said. ‘That quotation from Jim Morrison back in the warehouse, the one about watching the movie of your life on the day you die and having to see it recurring eternally forever – that’s the same thing Nietzsche was saying in that speech.’

‘Was it?’

‘Yeah, that’s the whole point. If you had to watch your life over and over again forever, it would be hell if your life were shit. I absolutely get it. If we don’t live lives we can be proud of, we’re fucked.’ Dominic cradled his head. ‘Oh man, these people are so right. I have to get my shit together.’

‘Jesus, I wouldn’t want to watch the movie of my life even once,’ Greg said. ‘I’d have to walk out of the cinema.’

They slumped back in their seats afflicted by the same horror. Greg definitely never wanted to meet that demon Nietzsche had mentioned. He felt a tap on the shoulder and looked up to see two girls – his fellow unemployed actors – standing in the aisle, gazing down at him.

‘Isn’t it exciting?’ Olivia clapped her hands.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a TV show, isn’t it? We were thinking it might be a pilot show for some reality TV thing. Maybe this is an audition. I mean, look at all the trouble they’ve gone to, and how enigmatic it all is. They’re obviously playing with our minds.’

‘Maybe we’re in a Darren Green show,’ Becky said.

Greg groaned. Darren Green, illusionist extraordinaire, could indeed be behind all of this. He was even on record as a huge fan of Nietzsche.

‘No way,’ Dominic grunted. ‘These people are for real and they’re going to help us change the world. No way is it some fucking dumb TV show.’

‘He’ll definitely get a part in the show,’ Olivia giggled. ‘They like the wild ones.’

‘We’re here,’ the driver announced and brought the coach to a halt.

‘Where?’ someone asked.

The driver didn’t answer and simply opened the doors. Everyone got up and started shuffling out.

‘You really think there will be TV cameras outside?’ Greg asked Olivia.

‘Might be secret filming. Hidden cameras, you know?’

Greg smiled. It was an occupational hazard for struggling actors to pray that everything they did was a potential opportunity to get on TV. When he stepped out, he thought they’d arrived in some rural wilderness. They were in a clearing in a dense forest, the trees stark and bare.

‘Must be Epping Forest,’ Dominic said. ‘It’s the only woodland within an easy drive of Hoxton.’

They spread out into the open space, gathering in little clusters to chat about what was happening. The other coach had pulled up too and the two drivers were standing together, having a cigarette.

The atmosphere was peculiar. No one made any attempt to take charge. The LLN girl was nowhere to be seen.

‘Still think it’s kosher?’ Olivia asked Dominic.

‘I think they want to unsettle us,’ Dominic said. ‘It’s good preparation for what’s to come. This is the beginning of a long journey.’

‘Darren Green has pulled this type of stunt before, you know.’

Dominic frowned and wandered off towards the edge of the forest.

‘Arise,’ a man’s booming voice said without warning.

‘It came from the woods,’ Becky said.

‘Zero Day is coming,’ the voice said.

They waited for the voice’s next announcement, and waited. Nothing happened. Seconds turned to minutes, but the voice didn’t speak again.

Many of the group started shuffling around. It was a bitterly cold day. The sky was as grey and sullen as it had been for weeks.

The LLN girl appeared and handed out a piece of paper to everyone.

‘I don’t believe it,’ someone said. ‘This is a complete joke.’

Olivia laughed. ‘I *told* you.’

The LLN girl gave Greg a copy from her pile. It was blank apart from a sentence typed in the middle of the page in a small font. ‘There are TV

cameras in the woods,' it said.

Dominic scrunched up his paper and threw it to the ground. '*Cunts*.'

Almost immediately, people changed their behaviour. They were all more animated, talking more loudly. Some started to lark around, while some resorted to arguing and gesticulating.

Greg went over to the drivers. 'Is this for real?'

'Can't tell you a thing, mate,' the nearest one said. 'We just drive.'

Olivia came over and tugged Greg's arm. She asked, in a whisper, if she could slap his face.

'What?'

'Listen, this is our big chance. We're professional actors. This is an audition for a new show. We can wipe the floor with the others. We have to make ourselves the focus of attention. Come on, work with me.'

Greg just stood there. 'I don't have a script. I don't know what character I'm supposed to be.'

'Well, *improvise*!'

Greg grabbed her and kissed her.

'Get off, you jerk.' She slapped his face.

'Why the hell did you do that?' Greg complained.

'Excellent,' she whispered. 'Now you've got the idea.'

'Time to get back on the bus,' the two drivers shouted. 'We're returning to London.'

Everyone made a laughably exaggerated return to the coaches, all ham acting and silly faces, apart from Dominic who leapt straight on. He remained silent while the others chatted excitedly. Olivia and Becky's theory was that it was definitely a Darren Green show and they were going to be introduced to Dosh and Rex, and that's why they'd been shown the video about them on the way here. It made sense to Greg. Well, as far as anything else did. He wondered what Dominic would do if he had to meet Dosh and Rex again.

All the blinds on the coach were rolled up now. Dominic stared out of the window. As for Greg, he found it infuriating the way nothing was ever explained.

It didn't take too long to get back to Hoxton. Dominic was anxious to get off the coach, and pushed past Greg without a word.

The LLN girl was at the front of the coach, handing a leaflet to everyone as they got off.

Greg took his handout and stepped down to the ground, into the fresh air. He noticed Dominic a few feet away, smiling, engrossed in reading the leaflet. Greg peered at his own copy.

'There were no cameras,' the handout said. 'You were taken to a wilderness and abandoned. No one gave you any rules. No one told you how things were. You were told lies about the cameras. How did you react? How did you feel? You speculated, you formed theories, many of you convinced

yourselves that you knew the truth. Yet there was no truth, just words on paper that related to nothing real. Is this not life itself? You are born and you find yourself in...in what? In a situation. Is it not up to you to create the rules? You are responsible for your own life. Who gave the “rule makers” the authority to make the rules? Why don’t you make the rules for a change?”

Dominic started to laugh. ‘Turn it over,’ he yelled. ‘Didn’t I tell you? – this is totally legit.’

‘We may or may not be in touch,’ the reverse side said. ‘You have many questions, no doubt, but what need is there for answers? You can supply them yourself if uncertainty troubles you. Is that not life? Faith brought the world to the sorry state it’s in today, and only faith can take it somewhere else. You must *believe*. Go home and prepare for freedom. We will contact you in the next few days and give you specific instructions.’

Greg looked at Olivia and Becky. They shrugged.

‘This is *exactly* the sort of thing Darren Green would do,’ Olivia insisted. ‘He’s totally fucking with our heads.’

‘No way,’ Dominic said. ‘OK, they’re being way too cryptic for my liking, but they have to be, don’t they?’

‘Why?’ Olivia asked.

‘Don’t you get it? The revolution starts here.’

9

Greg grabbed his bathrobe and hurried towards the door. The buzz of the doorbell was making the whole apartment vibrate.

‘OK, OK,’ he yelled, trying to get the din to stop. Instead, the sound of a hand battering against the door got louder. Who was in such a big hurry? He didn’t need this first thing in the morning. Bloody hell, it was only 7 am. He and the others had gone out drinking after their LLN magical mystery tour and got totally wasted, much to his regret now. He unlocked the door and pulled it open, then shrank like a callow vampire as daylight poured in.

It took his eyes a moment to adjust and then he saw the person who’d ruined his sleep. A man in red leathers with a gleaming red helmet and red-tinted visor was standing on his doorstep. The guy reached out and placed a scarlet envelope in Greg’s hand before turning and leaving without a word of explanation.

Greg assumed he was a courier. He took the envelope into his kitchen, noticing that it didn’t have his name or address on it. Instead, in white letters, was a sentence: ‘History has a purpose. We know what it is.’ What kind of weird shit was this? Greg had no doubt it was from the LLN.

He opened the envelope and emptied the contents onto the table. There, spread out in front of him, were several documents. There were no return details on any of them, no way of contacting the sender. He turned the

envelope upside down and a final item fell out – a white card with a message printed on it. ‘Watch the 8 o’clock morning news on BBC News 24. Become a new person.’

Greg made himself a black coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. He flicked through the documents. They didn’t make any sense. One was entitled *Cabaret Voltaire and Dada*. One was called *Futurism*. Another was labelled *Baudrillardian Hyperreality*, another *The Situationist International*. There was a document giving obscure facts about Napoleon Bonaparte. The other documents were called: *Deconstruction*; *Iconoclasm*; *Magical Thinking and the Destruction of Self*; *Hegel, the Dialectic and the End of History*; *The Master and Slave Dialectic and the need for Recognition*. The final one was even more baffling. It had Greg’s name at the top, and provided a profile of his career, one that bore no relationship to his actual career.

Greg sipped his coffee and tried to make some sense of what it all meant. A letter said that he would be meeting clients at ‘the event’. These documents, he began to understand, were briefing papers about various intellectual subjects; sort of bluffer’s guides to pretentious ideas. He was to digest them then go along to some big event, meet his clients and pass himself off as his doppelganger. The long and short of it was that he was supposed to use his acting skills to play a part; that of an expert guide to future trends – a futurologist. Wasn’t that exactly what he wanted? – to become a new person. They weren’t asking him to do anything weird. He was an actor, and this was just another role. It was still perfectly possible this was one of Darren Green’s mind-bending tricks, but he didn’t think so. Then he started to worry. Maybe he was being asked to take part in some fraud. Jesus, perhaps he could go to jail. He was totally out of his league.

Were the senders of the documents those people in that strange room back at the warehouse? His mind flashed up images of distinguished men and women, rich and self-confident, sure in their ability to pull people’s strings. Was this how the world of the powerful worked? Did they occasionally send an invitation to a nobody? But did that mean that the people behind the League for the Liberation of Nobodies were Somebodies?

Greg checked his watch. He gulped down his coffee, switched on his TV and flicked to the right channel.

A glamorous blonde newsreader appeared. ‘Excitement has been mounting as celebrities and the super rich arrive in London for the event of the year,’ she said. ‘Police have downplayed fears that the event is a major security risk, given the recent murders of three billionaires, and have insisted that policing will be unobtrusive. Nevertheless, there are rumours that MI5 will be conducting detailed surveillance, and two SAS units are on standby. Many of the rich and famous dignitaries are said to be bringing their own security teams. The cream of British celebrities will be turning out, led by Jenny Lavelle and Harry Prince, better known, of course, as Dosh and Rex.’

A picture of the River Thames flashed up. A craft was moored in the centre of the river, under a white canvas.

‘Tomorrow,’ the newsreader went on, ‘John Galt, the world’s richest man, will be unveiling the Golden Barge that he has been painstakingly building for the last year. He will hold a glamorous reception – the party of the year – onboard. It’s the event everyone wants to be at, and we will have a team right there on the riverside to bring you all the latest news and pictures.’

‘You will be introduced to your clients at 2 o’clock on the day of the event,’ Greg’s letter said. ‘You must wear a costume; that of Count Alessandro di Cagliostro. You simply need to turn up at the security check-in facility, and everything will be taken care of. You will use the assumed name of Gerard Lambert. Your task is to ensure that your clients take you into their full confidence. You will be told who they are on the day. You are also required to make a very specific prediction. You must inform your clients that the Age of Celebrity will end within the next four weeks.’

10

‘Issue!’ grunted the bearded guy in a moth-eaten bobble hat. ‘Sir, Madam, *Issue*.’ He waved his magazine towards Greg. ‘Help the homeless.’

Hoxton High Street at 2 o’clock on a Monday afternoon in February was always grim. Everyone shuffled back and forth, eyes downcast, dodging the erratically driven mobility scooters belonging to the legions of people whose legs had mysteriously packed in. There were also many at the pre-scooter stage, clicking along with walking sticks or Zimmer frames. Greg stared at the homeless bloke, then at the mangy dog squatting behind him.

‘No thanks,’ Greg said, avoiding eye contact. Every time he saw a *Big Issue* salesman he felt uncomfortable. He felt the usual pangs of sympathy, of course, but also an odd hatred. These people could be trying much harder to make a life for themselves, he thought. He was hardly well off himself. His part time job shelf-packing in a supermarket paid the bills, but didn’t allow him anything more than the most modest of livings. He had time to go to auditions – and be snubbed – but at least he was chasing his dream.

He’d seen this particular *Big Issue* seller hundreds of times. The guy seemed to be there all day every day, even on Saturdays and Sundays. He was astoundingly persistent. Patient too, and able to endure all weathers. He was resistant to the frequent verbal and physical abuse he received, and the contempt that marked most people’s eyes when they looked at him. There he was day in and day out on exactly the same spot – his ‘patch’ – flogging his magazine. Surely a man with those qualities could be a successful salesman? And he could certainly pack shelves as well as Greg, so why didn’t he? The whole thing was a mystery. Did the guy actually enjoy his life in some bizarre way? Normally, Greg stayed well clear, but every now and again, as

today, he wasn't concentrating properly and almost blundered into him.

After the episode with the LLN shoe shiner, Greg felt he needed to buck up his attitude towards others, but he found himself doing the same old sidestepping routine. He'd taken a few steps past the vagrant when he stopped, feeling ashamed of himself. 'Can I ask you a question?' he asked, going back. For a moment, he thought he saw a flash of hate in the guy's eyes, an urge to tell him to *fuck off*.

'Yeah, what?' the guy replied gruffly.

'Why do you keep saying, "Sir, Madam, *Issue*," over and over again? You do it all the time. I see other Big Issue salesmen who don't speak at all.'

'No, you *don't* see them.'

'Sorry?'

'Listen, mate, I say that stuff for one reason – if I didn't, I'd be invisible.'

'What?'

'I have to get in their faces to prove I exist. I even like abuse because at least people are acknowledging that I'm actually here. People like you don't have a clue, mate. At my level, just being visible is my biggest triumph of the day.' There was terrible sadness in his eyes. 'So, do you want a copy or not?'

Greg nodded and paid up. He took a few steps and unthinkingly tossed the magazine in the nearest bin.

'Cunt!' the vagrant shouted.

Greg walked away fast. It started to drizzle. The vagrant's remark about invisibility explained a lot. Whenever he passed alcoholics hanging around on park benches, they always spoke to him, or, rather, made some incomprehensible remark directed his way. He never understood why they bothered, but now the answer was obvious. If they didn't roar, no one would know they were there. The world, Greg realised, is full of the invisible, desperately trying to find any reflection in a mirror. They were the undead.

He went round to Chloe's studio. She was in the middle of making a new installation, feebly trying to whistle – a sure sign she was in a good mood. She looked perfect. A miniskirt and a tight vest showed off her body to maximum advantage, and an orange bowler hat completed her look.

'What do you think?' she asked. 'It's called the Holy Trinity.'

Greg stared at it. As usual, Chloe had assembled plaster cast body parts, linked by steel wire and optical fibre cables. Three penises were suspended in midair, one dangling just in front of the mouth of a cast of a young woman's face, two positioned in close proximity to a cast of her bottom.

'Is that what they call it?' he asked. 'Triple penetration, I mean.'

Chloe smiled. 'That's right: a penis in every orifice. Would you ever take part in a Holy Trinity?'

Greg winced. 'No way. That's disgusting.'

Chloe stroked one of the suspended penises. 'Oh, I don't know, I find the idea horny. Total penetration. Mmmm, I think it's quite lush.'

'You're not being serious.' Greg paused and gazed at her. 'Are you?'

‘I haven’t done it yet,’ Chloe said teasingly. ‘What would you say if I asked you to be one of the three guys? Maybe I’ll request it for my birthday.’ She winked mischievously, held up three fingers and wiggled them. ‘Anyway, how did it go yesterday with those LLN people...the nobododdies, as I shall henceforth call them. I tried to call you last night, but you didn’t answer. I knocked on your door and you weren’t in. John Paul and I thought you might have been kidnapped or something. Luckily, one of John Paul’s mates spotted you in the pub. Oh, and word on the street was that you had two sexy girls in tow. A bit of an FFM going on there, eh?’

‘They’re just friends, two fellow unemployed actors,’ Greg said. ‘We had to go for a drink after the day we’d had. Dominic was with us too. He was hyper. It was the most mind-blowing day of his life, he said.’

‘What was so amazing? It looked like an AA meeting for nobododdies as far as I could see.’

‘No, they made us look at the world in a whole new way.’

‘Oh God, it’s not a religious cult, is it?’

‘I’m not really sure what it is.’

‘Are you a member now?’

‘I don’t know. They’ve offered me some sort of task. There’s no pay or anything.’

‘Slave drivers!’

‘Actually, they want me to do an acting job. I’m supposed to learn all sorts of intellectual stuff and then pass myself off as someone who tries to work out what shape the future will take. A futurologist.’

‘Wow, that actually sounds interesting. And who are you supposed to be fooling with this fake job?’

‘There’s the thing. The LLN claim they can get me onto the Golden Barge.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘My clients will be on there, apparently. I don’t know who they are yet. It’s a fancy dress event and I’ve been instructed to dress up as someone called Count Alessandro di Cagliostro. I had to Google him. He was an eighteenth century conman who liked to dabble in the occult. It seems an odd choice, but...’

‘No, this is all bullshit.’ Then Chloe smiled. ‘But if it was for real, I’d fall in love with you. I’d grab you and give you a big, slobbery French kiss, and my tongue would disappear inside your mouth and live there for the next ten years.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Don’t you want to kiss me?’

‘I told you, stop it.’

‘You’re no fun,’ she said sharply. ‘So, are you doing it? You might as well give it a go. What’s the worst that could happen?’

‘I could be a complete fuck up. I could get arrested. I’m pretty sure it’s

illegal to go around pretending to be someone else.'

'Get real, Greg. Bullshitters control our society. They're all faking it. That's one of the requirements for getting to the top: complete inauthenticity.'

'I'm not sure. I'm actually a bit...' Greg stopped.

'What, scared? You're always scared. That's what's holding you back. When you go to auditions, I bet the casting directors smell your fear. If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will.'

Chloe's words cut right through Greg. All the more so because he agreed with her. But it was the casual, callous way she'd tossed them out there. How could somebody so sassy and beautiful have such an ugly way of dealing with her friends?

'What about you then?' he retaliated. 'What's your excuse? Why do you spend all your time playing with cocks and fannies? Nobody's buying it.'

A film of tears quickly clouded Chloe's eyes. 'Go away,' she said.

11

The banks of the Thames were thronged with spectators and fans. Even the sun had come out. Blue sky, cotton wool clouds...a perfect day for celebrity spotting. A flotilla of motorboats surged around John Galt's Golden Barge. It was still under covers, and none of the paparazzi who had been hanging around for days had been able to get any good pictures. Even though no one had seen it, it was already a legend. The less people knew about it, the more its myth grew. It was a celebrity in its own right. Endless artists' impressions and mock-ups had appeared in the newspapers and on TV.

It was one o'clock and the grand unveiling was scheduled for an hour later. The barge was positioned in the shadow of Tower Bridge, with thousands of spectators lined up along the bridge's edge, cameras and camcorders at the ready. Some fans had lowered enormous banners over the side. One read, 'We love you Dosh and Rex.'

Greg got into the queue for the security check-in centre. He was self-conscious, what with being a complete fake dressed in a powdered wig and the elegant clothes of an eighteenth century European gentleman. Dress to impress, to the theme of wealth and power, was what John Galt had asked for. He was getting exactly what he wanted. Famous actors, singers, TV personalities, and the sort of people whom no one would ever recognise but who nevertheless had an incredible aura of power – the super rich – were standing chatting in the queue. They were dressed as historical figures such as Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Richard the Lionheart, Marie Antoinette, Caligula, Cleopatra, Abraham Lincoln; superheroes such as Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, the Incredible Hulk; and there were mythical

and legendary figures such as King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, King Midas, and the Greek gods of Mount Olympus.

Big, bald, scowling security men in dark suits flanked the queue.

The check-in centre was located in a golden tent, modelled on one that Henry VIII reputedly used to impress a French king. As for the barge, it was moored at the pier, with a red-carpeted gangplank leading onto it. The idea was that the illustrious guest list would go aboard, the barge would manoeuvre into the centre of the river and then the canvas covers would be removed to reveal the craft in all its majesty. One commentator had already labelled it, 'The vessel of our contemporary gods.'

With the Tower of London on one bank of the Thames, City Hall on the opposite bank, and the WWII cruiser HMS Belfast moored downstream, the same commentator had said that the Golden Barge would float between royal, political and naval power. It would represent a greater power: the alchemy of wealth and fame, the fuel now powering the world.

Greg was in an odd mood. John Paul had told him it was all bullshit and he was being taken for a ride. He suspected that was true, but if he really thought he could make the grade as an actor, shouldn't he be able to pull this off? He'd spent the whole of the previous night reading his briefing documents and had managed to convince himself he knew his part, but now he felt his familiar pre-audition nausea. When he got near the head of the queue, he saw Dominic sitting at the security desk, examining the guests' invitations and ticking off their names from a list.

'Gerard Lambert, isn't it?' Dominic said when he reached the desk. 'Can I have a word in private?' Dominic stood up and asked a colleague to take over from him. The two men left the tent and took a short walk. 'Glad you could make it.'

'I can't say I was expecting to find you here,' Greg said.

'A courier came round to my place on Monday,' Dominic said. 'He gave me a package with instructions, and here I am.'

Greg nodded. 'Same with me.'

'He visited several of us. There are six of us here.'

'Isn't it risky for us to be seen together?'

Dominic gave an indulgent smile. 'Who's paying attention to the likes of us? We're nobodies, the invisible men. No one suspects anything, and no one's looking.'

'How come the LLN were able to manage all of this?' Greg asked.

'How do you think? – they're smart and resourceful.'

'What did they ask you to do?'

'I have my things to do and you have yours. No one gets to see the big picture, except the LLN's leaders.'

'And no one knows who they are.'

'Let's not worry about that,' Dominic said. 'Let's concentrate on getting our stuff done.' He handed Greg a gleaming gold card. 'There are only thirty

of these. It's an 'Access-All-Areas' card. No one will ask you any questions.' He reached into his pocket and brought out another small envelope. 'The names of your two clients are in here. They're as big as they come, but I'm sure you'll be cool about it. Don't look at their names until John Galt has finished his welcome speech.'

'Listen, we're not doing anything criminal, are we?'

Dominic laughed and pointed at the Golden Barge. 'The vessel under those covers is a recreation of a ship commissioned by the super rich of Venice in the eighteenth Century. It was a palace of gold leaf designed to float in the centre of the Venetian lagoon. Back in the day, it was intended to astound the world. That's why Galt was so taken with it. He wants the whole world to see how rich he is, and be equally astounded. I think that's the only crime going on around here, don't you?'

'It's going to be a hell of a sight when they pull off the covers.' Greg stared at the hidden craft, resting at the pier. 'What happened to the original?'

'Napoleon's soldiers stripped it of its gold then set it on fire. A fitting end, huh?'

They watched a line of dignitaries shuffling over the red-carpeted gangplank that came to an end under a gleaming golden canopy leading into the vessel's interior.

'The original was branded by some as *The Ship of Fools*,' Dominic said. 'Not much has changed.' He gave Greg a wink. 'You might as well go aboard. Good luck.'

Greg nodded. 'You too.'

Dominic gripped his arm. 'Do a good job, Greg. Today the whole world will learn about the power of the LLN.'

12

Greg was wedged in amongst the rich and famous in a large reception room beneath the deck. In every direction, the finest art treasures glinted and gleamed as though they had come from Aladdin's Cave. A great golden Grandfather clock ticked towards 2 o'clock.

And then Napoleon appeared. Or, rather, John Galt, the richest man on earth, dressed as the great French Emperor. Greg pushed through the A-list guests to get closer. Galt's wealth had made him almost mythical, a modern Midas whose golden touch seemed to come without any drawbacks. Greg didn't like to admit it, but he felt excited to be here, in the presence of this man.

'Welcome, one and all,' Galt said in a supremely confident voice. 'Today you will see the wonder of the ages, a craft of the gods that will take your breath away.' He gestured at the opulent decor. 'Why all of this extravagance? Because we're worth it. Why did we build it? Because we can.'

You may think that sounds arrogant, but haven't we played the humility card for far too long? Why do we play the game of hiding our talents? Is it just so that we don't upset liberal commentators? They've said of me that I'm like some boo-hiss pantomime villain, the unacceptable face of capitalism, to borrow their tedious favourite cliché. I don't apologise for my wealth. Why should I? I earned it. All of us here have.

'It's time for us to shine, to illuminate the world. The only thing holding back humanity is the mass of unachievers who are jealous of success. I want greatness and glory for this world of ours. I want earth to be brighter than any star. All of the universe will point to this small planet in a forgotten corner of an unimportant galaxy and marvel. I want to sweep aside all those petty functionaries who stand in our way. I'm not here to play the PR game and I have contempt for political correctness. I'm going to tell it as it is, to say what we're all really thinking.

'The truth is that we are the wonders of the age. Not for us the 9-5 jobs, the daily grind, the petty concerns of petty lives. Are you shocked by my candour? Don't worry, we're surrounded by friends here. No one will betray us. They won't prattle to the press for their thirty pieces of silver. At least we here still have the highest standards.

'Friends, we can make a heaven on earth for everyone, but only if we unshackle our ambitions. This craft shows what we can achieve if we put our minds to it, if we reach for the stars.'

His guests cheered and applauded.

'So, welcome to my floating palace. First of all, let me assure you that we are in the safest of hands. The captain, navigator and helmsman all have the rank of admiral. As many of you know, the Golden Barge is a reconstruction of the *Bucintoro*, the marvellous testament to the glory of Venice. It's covered with gold leaf and has twenty full-sized gold statues of famous men of history such as Caesar, Hannibal and Alexander the Great. The vessel, as you can see, has the finest crystal chandeliers and velvet drapes, all sourced from the top suppliers in the world. A fitting environment, don't you think, for the stellar gathering we have aboard today? Many of you have personal wealth in excess of one hundred million pounds. The rest are mostly just very rich, and if you're not rich then you shouldn't be on here...unless you're working.'

He smiled in the direction of a group of gorgeous waiters and waitresses. The waiters, all remarkably handsome, were dressed as 1920s gigolos, and the waitresses, equally striking, as Jazz Age flappers. They looked fabulous, putting many of the guests to shame. The guests clapped politely.

Greg felt like an impostor. He expected to be spotted at any moment and hauled off the ship by the security guards. He was dressed as a world famous conman of yesteryear, and the job the LLN had given him was to con two illustrious clients. He nervously fingered the envelope containing their names.

‘This vessel isn’t a sailing ship,’ Galt went on. ‘It’s powered by one hundred and sixty-eight oarsmen. The finest, naturally: they’ve all rowed for Oxford or Cambridge in the last few years. Goethe said of the original vessel that its only purpose “was to show to the people their princes in all their magnificence.” And that sums up what we’re all about.’

A man in a cream linen suit and sporting a white panama hat went up to Galt and whispered to him. Galt smiled and nodded. ‘I’ve just been informed that everyone is now aboard. We are being towed into the centre of the Thames beneath Tower Bridge. Then the covers will be removed and the world will be able to see the Golden Barge in all its splendour. In the meantime, we shall listen to divine music – Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* from the fourth movement of symphony number nine.’ He gave a signal and perfect sound emerged from concealed speakers. By the time Beethoven’s dazzling composition had finished, the vessel was in midstream, ready to be unveiled.

‘The world awaits our pleasure,’ Galt said. ‘It’s always the same. They wait for us, not the other way around. Can you imagine a world without us? Nothing of significance would happen. Only we animate the world’s soul.’ He held up his hand. ‘And now the moment has come when the world will gasp. I will press a button and several tugboats will remove the covers.’

As everyone applauded, Galt flourished his hand and activated the button. ‘Onto the deck,’ he urged. ‘See the glory of the world.’

Greg jostled with the others to get a good position on the deck. The sun was gloriously bright now, as if even God were doing his bit on Galt’s behalf. The Thames glittered like a silver vein. But, above all, it was the gilded barge that sparkled and gleamed, turning the water around it gold. Everywhere, ornate gold furnishings played with the light. Gilded rays shot out in every direction.

Most of the illustrious guests were crowded into a saloon under a sumptuous red velvet canopy. At the far end was a purple canopy reserved for Galt’s exclusive use.

As the watching crowds took in the spectacle, there were gasps amongst them, followed by wild cheering.

Galt, at the prow of the barge, addressed his private audience. ‘This is a marvel that the world will talk about for centuries. We are the world’s elite. Others long to be us. The red saloon in which most of you are standing has ninety luxury seats, forty-eight ornate windows, and enough space for two hundred and fifty guests. Isn’t it a room suitable for gods?’

He raised his right arm, revealing a solid gold bling bracelet, and an equally bling diamond ring that dazzled in the sunshine in a hundred different ways. Between his thumb and index finger he held up a gold ring. ‘The Doge of Venice would take a gold ring and toss it into the waves to show the Venetians’ mastery over the seas for another year. I shall now do the same on behalf of Great Britain, and with this symbolic act I shall cement this great trading nation’s marriage to the sea. This island race, this greatest sea power

in all of history, is and always has been the world's beacon. Our navy gave us the world's greatest empire. It's time for this grand old nation to recover its former glory, to rise again from the waves. This small but brilliant nation gave birth to the modern age: to industry, technology, commerce, the levers of wealth that allow us to stand here as...'

He stopped in mid-sentence, his mouth gaping. A whispering sound grew amongst the watching crowd like the sound of an approaching army of ants. Everywhere, heads turned to face in the same direction as Galt.

A surreal armada was approaching along the river. Inflatable fat cats in all the colours of the spectrum, and with faces of the super rich stuck on them, were bobbing up and down, followed by scores of canoes, full of members of the League for the Liberation of Nobodies in their characteristic newspaper uniforms. Thousands more of the LLN appeared along the banks of the river. They appeared to have come from nowhere, an invisible army springing from the ground.

Galt was momentarily stunned, then furious, then calm again. 'They haven't done a very good job, have they?' he sneered. 'Those fat cats aren't nearly fat enough! A few thousand people control all the world's meaningful wealth. Now that's not just fat, that's morbidly obese.'

His audience guffawed.

In one of the LLN canoes, protestors held up a banner saying, 'Why don't you turn back the waves, King Canute?'

'You'd better believe it,' Galt bellowed. He turned to his assistant in the white Panama hat. 'Row through them.'

'Yes, sir.'

Galt stood there for a moment, his face oddly blank. Then he began to gaze into his audience with a suspicious stare, as though he were suddenly sensing enemies all around him. 'You,' he said, pointing at Greg. 'I don't recognise you.'

Greg was seized by panic. God, he should never have placed himself so close to Galt. What a stupid error. He became aware of all the nearby VIPs looking his way. He heard murmurs.

'I'm Count Alessandro di Cagliostro.' He tried to sound confident, like a man backed up by great riches.

'No, your real name.'

Greg swallowed hard. He only just stopped himself from saying his own name. 'I'm Gerard Lambert.'

'Who?'

'Gerard Lambert.'

Galt gazed at him quizzically. 'I'm sure several journalists have tried to smuggle themselves aboard. Would you know anything about that, Mr Lambert?' He snapped his fingers. 'Security.'

Greg felt his stomach lurching. When he glanced to his right, he noticed Dominic. *Thank God.*

Dominic strode over to Galt. 'Sir?'

'Do a security check on Gerard Lambert.'

Dominic brought out a blackberry and tapped the keyboard. 'I have all of his details here.' He showed the screen to Galt.

'Very impressive,' Galt said. 'I suppose you're suitably dressed then.'

'Sorry?'

Greg realised that the VIPs around him had fallen silent and were all listening intently. Henry VIII and his six wives were right behind him. He felt claustrophobic in this narrow prow section of the Barge. Despite its opulence, it was a small space and far too many people had crowded in to get near Galt.

'Well, you've come as Cagliostro, and it says on here that you're an astrologer.'

'A futurologist,' Greg said.

'I beg your pardon. And how does a futurologist earn enough money to get aboard my Golden Barge? Did you foresee a massive lottery win?'

'Several years ago, I invested as much money as I could in your holding company. I was one of your earliest investors.'

'Ah, a man of discernment. In that case, you fully deserve to be here.'

Galt came over and threw his arm around Greg, simultaneously dismissing Dominic with a nod. 'And there was me thinking you might be some kind of fraudster, brazenly parading around as one of history's greatest conmen. But no con artist would be so bold, would they?'

'No one could fool you, Mr Galt.'

'That's right, Mr Lambert. No one pulls the wool over John Galt's eyes.' He looked over the side as the barge made its way through the bobbing fat cats and LLN canoes. 'I make it my business to know more than others. I know all about Cagliostro, for instance. He was one of the most enigmatic men in history. I've always been drawn to people like that. He was an alchemist, a Kabbalahist and a magician – a charlatan, in other words.' Galt squeezed Greg's shoulder until his grip became uncomfortable. 'He called himself a futurologist too.' His squeeze grew even harder.

Fear gripped Greg like a hangman's rope. He knew he had to fire back with some bold reply. 'I can tell you your future, Mr Galt. The LLN are going to cause you a major headache.'

Galt released his hold. 'Are you crazy?'

'Don't underestimate them. They're clever, organised, and they're tapping into growing resentment against unfair wealth.'

'Unfair, you say? These lazy people want a share of riches they didn't help to create. That's what I call unfair.'

'Nevertheless, they're going to be a problem for you, and I'd say a big one.'

'You can't be serious. They're nobodies.'

'You think they like being nobodies?'

‘Who cares?’ Galt laughed and several people around him laughed too, especially Henry VIII.

‘Let them eat cake,’ said a woman dressed as Marie Antoinette. She went to the edge and tossed a large slice of chocolate cake into the nearest canoe.

Galt applauded. ‘The LLN are just the latest face of the politics of envy, Mr Lambert. It will soon fizzle out. We’ll row through this turbulent water.’

‘Look what happened to the real Marie Antoinette,’ Greg said.

Galt pointed at his own uniform. ‘But the French Revolution brought Napoleon to power. Great men always rise to the top in a crisis. I don’t fear trouble. When others falter is precisely when the great push ahead.’

‘And the bigger the trouble, the greater the opportunity?’

‘Precisely.’

‘So, what about Waterloo?’ Greg was delighted that he was managing to remember the briefing material the LLN had given him.

Galt acknowledged the point as though it were a good sword thrust in a fencing contest. ‘Well, unlike my hero, I won’t be losing any battles. It’s not as if I’m up against Wellington and the British army.’

‘Wellington referred to his soldiers as the scum of the earth.’

‘You know your stuff, Mr Lambert. Even so, his soldiers were disciplined, obeyed orders and knew who their betters were. They’re not an anarchic rabble led by God knows who.’

‘The LLN might surprise you. I’ve been studying them and I’m impressed by what I’ve seen. Guerrilla tactics. Hit and run. You won’t lure them into a pitched battle.’

‘I don’t know why you’re showing them so much respect.’ Galt again looked over the side. ‘Like a knife through butter, Mr Lambert. Your friends are fleeing at the first sign of resistance. You’re supposed to march towards the sound of the guns, not away.’

‘But you’re never supposed to do what the enemy expects,’ Greg snapped back then held out his hand. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Mr Galt.’

‘A pleasure indeed, Mr Lambert.’ Galt took Greg’s hand and gripped it hard. ‘You’re an interesting man. I think I ought to pay attention to your future career.’

‘Not as much as I’ll be paying to yours.’ Greg turned and walked away...elated. He’d done it. He’d come up against the richest man on earth and his nerve had held. Jesus, he’d entered the *zone* – that miraculous area where everything clicks, where gravity vanishes and you weightlessly accomplish the most difficult tasks.

He made his way to the toilets, smiling at everyone he passed. Several people pointed him out. He assumed they were saying, ‘Watch out for him. Mr Galt says he’s going far.’

As he was going below deck, he collided with a beautiful girl coming up the steps. He recognised her straight away: Black Beauty, the girl he’d seen in Hoxton and at the restaurant. She was dressed as a Valkyrie, with a horned

helmet, breastplate, leather miniskirt and thigh length leather boots. She looked glorious. Feeling triumphant, Greg decided to chance his arm. 'Nice costume,' he said. He made eyes at her helmet. 'Very horny.'

'Creep,' she replied and squeezed past.

Greg closed his eyes in horror.

Then the girl stopped. 'Hey, I've seen you, haven't I?' She squinted at him, her face an odd mixture of curiosity and distaste. 'You're out of place somehow.' She poked him in the chest with her sword. 'As a Valkyrie, it's my job to select those who are to die on the battlefield. Am I to choose you?'

Greg tried to reply, but no words came.

'There's definitely something familiar about you,' the Valkyrie said. 'Don't worry, it will come to me. I never forget a face. Then I'll decide if you're one of the dead.'

'Excuse me.' Greg fled to the toilets, feeling sick.

The toilets were spectacular, all marble and gold, fit for a king. But Greg's good feeling had evaporated. He was back to his uncertain self, convinced he'd never be able to pull this off, sure the Valkyrie would remember him and expose him in front of everyone. The big security guards would grab him and put him in the hold until they reached land where they'd throw him off while everyone laughed at him. Maybe the police would be called and be waiting to interview him. Why did that girl hate him so much? Whenever he saw her, his heart leapt, yet within seconds she always managed to reduce him to a wreck.

He locked himself inside one of the cubicles and tried to breathe slowly. You're an actor, he thought. Fucking well act. He went through Hamlet's *To Be or Not To Be* speech. Alas, poor Yorick, he mouthed over and over again.

He left the cubicle and went to the sink to rinse his hands. Winston Churchill and Stalin were standing at the urinals, chatting about how pretentious Galt was, but admitting they'd never say it to his face. 'Yes, that's one man I'd never fuck with,' Stalin said.

Greg gazed at himself in the mirror. He was looking pale, haunted. Where had his sparkle gone? He was on top of the world seconds ago and now he was in the lowest circle of hell, pursued by a deadly Valkyrie. He didn't want to go back on deck, but he was trapped. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't get off this damned barge. He reached into his pocket, and brought out Dominic's envelope. He opened it then stared at the names of his two famous clients. And stared some more. No way he could pull this off.

13

When Greg went back on deck, the sun had gone, replaced by a sky of laden clouds.

'A storm coming, eh, Mr Lambert?'

Greg was startled to find himself beside Galt again. Galt broke off from a conversation with Marie Antoinette, to her obvious disappointment, and gave Greg a slap on the back. 'So much for your LLN friends.'

Greg gazed over the side and saw a chaotic mess of LLN canoes colliding with one another, their crews in confusion, trying to avoid the beating oars of the Golden Barge. The inflatable fat cats were pathetically bobbing up and down all around them.

'I probably sound like a CD stuck in a loop,' Galt said, 'but, as you can see, the rich always win.'

Greg felt queasy. The LLN now looked a bit pathetic, no match for the likes of Galt. He half thought of jumping overboard and clambering onto one of the canoes to get out of this situation, but some part of him still believed his salvation lay in acting. Whatever he did, he couldn't afford to show weakness in front of Galt. At the corner of his eye, he caught Dominic staring at him, arms folded, scowling. He tried to think of a way of firing back at Galt and dredged up another fact about Waterloo. 'When the Imperial Guard marched up the slope towards Wellington's army, Napoleon thought he'd won, but we know what happened next.'

Galt adjusted his hat. 'Napoleon wasn't feeling well that day, but I'm just fine.' He looked over Greg's shoulder and waved. 'Ah, Jenny and Harry, come and meet Mr Gerard Lambert. He's an interesting man.'

Greg turned and found himself gazing at the world's golden couple. Literally. Dosh and Rex were dressed as Greek gods, with their skin painted gold, and gold laurel wreaths on their heads. They shone.

Greg swallowed extra hard and reflexively glanced at Dominic.

Dominic gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Greg wanted to do the opposite, but instead copied Dominic's gesture. Somehow the very act, the subtlest upward and downward motion of his head, committed him to what he had to do. He started to feel almost tranquil. When he opened the envelope in the toilet and seen Dosh and Rex's names, he thought his task impossible. He wasn't much more confident now, but the challenge intrigued him. He imagined himself as an escapist in chains being thrown into water in a sealed sack. If he could escape, he'd be proud of himself forever. Unfortunately, drowning was the more likely outcome.

'Hi, Gerard,' Rex said in his high-pitched Cockney squeak and held out his hand.

Greg clasped it then turned to Dosh, but she just squinted at him.

'We're Zeus and Hero,' Rex said.

'Hera,' Dosh corrected.

'Sorry, Hera.'

'The supreme Greek God and his wife,' Galt said. 'Isn't that appropriate? Or perhaps it's hubris?'

'What?' Rex said.

Galt smiled. 'Mr Lambert here has come as Count Alessandro di

Cagliostro. One of Cagliostro's greatest achievements was to discover the secret of eternal youth. He was willing to confide it to anyone who gave him enough money.'

'Oh, really.' Dosh suddenly became interested.

'Well, Cagliostro was rumoured to keep popping up throughout history,' Galt said, 'faking his death whenever necessary and assuming a fresh identity. Maybe the real Cagliostro is standing in front of us, still in full possession of all his ancient secrets. Have we rumbled you, Count?'

Greg was astounded that Dosh and Rex seemed to be taking this nonsense seriously. He noticed the mischievous glint in Galt's eyes.

'I've travelled far and wide and seen many things.' Greg tried to sound enigmatic. 'Naturally, if Mr Galt were correct about my true identity, I'd never confirm it.'

'Ah, it seems the Count won't be shedding any light on his secrets,' Galt said. 'The Count, or is it Mr Lambert, makes his living these days as a futurologist.'

'Futurology?' Dosh asked. 'Horoscopes and stuff?'

Galt sniggered.

'You can see the future?' Rex asked.

'It's nothing like that. I study current trends and try to project how they'll shape the world of the future. There are loads of new ideas out there right now. Some will prosper and others fail. My job is to find the winners and think about how they will change society.'

'I don't get you,' Rex said.

'Let me give you an example. Once upon a time a few guys started kicking a ball around a field and trying to work out the rules for how to play their new game.'

'Football!'

'Exactly. Look how influential football is now. A guy doing my job back in 1848 when football was invented at Cambridge University would have looked at this new game and realised how compulsive it was going to be. Could he have looked a hundred and sixty years into the future and predicted how wealthy footballers would become, how many millions of spectators would go along to stadiums every week?'

'But they had no telly back then,' Dosh said.

'But could TV have been predicted? And if it could, what impact would it have on football? Those are the sorts of things a futurologist has to think about. The main technique I use is dialectics.'

'Oh, I know all about dianetics. One of my best friends is a Scientologist.'

'No, not dianetics, *dialectics*.'

'What?'

'Come on, Gerard,' Galt said, 'dialectics is too heavy for a day like this.'

'Who do you work for?' Dosh asked.

‘Guys like me.’ Galt grinned. ‘I need to use every trick to stay ahead of the opposition. This man has an excellent track record. Major companies have used his services. It’s as though he has his own crystal ball. He looked into the future one day and predicted that I would be the richest man on earth, before the world knew anything about me. Isn’t that clever?’

Greg had no idea why Galt was helping him out, giving him the best cover story imaginable. An endorsement from Galt was like being blessed by the Pope. It was a rock solid, unshakable guarantee of legitimacy. But why? What was for sure was that Dosh and Rex would never doubt him now.

‘So, what does the future hold for us?’ Rex asked.

Greg saw his opportunity. ‘I’m afraid it’s not good. We’re coming to the end of the age of celebrity. I’m going to go out on a limb and say it could happen within the next four weeks.’

Dosh appeared incredulous but Rex managed a smile. ‘Man, you have balls to say that to us.’

‘And what about me?’ Galt asked.

‘Sorry, same for you. The day of the super-rich will soon be over.’

Galt laughed. ‘I suspect you’re paying too much attention to that crazy stock market bet some madman made recently.’

‘That’s just one of the signs.’ Greg was revelling in this. He saw wonder in the eyes of the others. The idea of wealth and celebrity vanishing seemed to flit across their minds like some nightmarish black butterfly.

‘I like you,’ Rex said. ‘I want to know more about what you do. I mean, in depth. Why don’t you come and work for us? We’ll pay you twice as much as those companies you advise. You can hang out with us, see what we get up to, and tell us how to avoid the future you think you’ve seen for us.’

‘Well, there’s an offer you’d be insane to refuse,’ Galt said.

‘I don’t know. I’d have to think about it.’ Un-fucking-believable, Greg thought. With almost no effort, he’d done exactly what the LLN had asked.

‘We don’t believe in thinking about things, Gerard,’ Rex said. ‘Do you want to come and work with us or not?’

‘In that case, it’s yes.’

‘This calls for Cristal.’ Galt snapped his fingers and one of the gigolo waiters appeared, holding a silver tray of glasses full of bubbling champagne.

Greg took one of the glasses and treated himself to a large gulp.

‘Ah, Lucinda,’ Galt said, again looking over Greg’s shoulder. ‘Come and join us.’

Greg turned and found the Valkyrie bearing down on him. She went and stood by Galt’s side.

‘So, are there any men who have attracted your wrath?’ Galt asked. ‘Who will you leave as a bloody corpse on the field of battle?’

The Valkyrie looked Greg up and down in the haughtiest way then pointed her sword at him. ‘This one. I don’t think he’s one of us.’

Christ, Greg thought, she could ruin everything. She might remember

him from Hoxton High Street and *Alberigo*.

‘Oh, how intriguing,’ Galt said. ‘Is the Count a charlatan after all?’

‘You’re right,’ Greg said. ‘I’m not one of you. You believe the curtain will never come down on the good life. I’m the one person aboard who thinks that the LLN are the future. The dialectic makes it inevitable.’

‘Oooooohhhhhh!’ Galt said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Even the Valkyrie smiled. ‘Well, I suppose he’s amusing, if nothing else.’ She held out her hand to Greg. ‘I’m Lucinda Bloom, Jenny and Harry’s agent.’

‘Gerard Lambert,’ Greg said. ‘I’m a futurologist.’ He noticed Galt squeezing Lucinda’s waist. She made no attempt to remove his hand.

‘I’m glad you don’t hate him, Lucinda,’ Rex said. ‘I’ve offered him a job.’

Lucinda raised her eyebrows.

‘Well, if he’s right about things, we’ll soon be needing his advice.’

‘Eminently sensible,’ Galt said. ‘You’d better give Lucinda your details, Mr Lambert, so that she can make all the necessary arrangements.’

Lucinda pulled a Blackberry PDA out of a mini leather handbag. Greg gave her his mobile phone number and she said she’d ring him the next day. She handed him her business card and asked him to email his CV to her.

‘Good, that’s business taken care of,’ Galt said. ‘Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to pick our futurologist’s brain for a moment. Would you care to come to my private office, Mr Lambert?’

Greg was struggling to take all of this in. Why was Galt being so friendly? The world’s richest man was showering him with favours. It wasn’t simply unlikely, it was impossible. As he followed Galt, he noticed that everyone cleared instantly out of Galt’s way as though the sea were parting. Was his whole life like this – everyone deferring to him, no one and nothing ever impeding him? People like Galt seemed to glide effortlessly through life. They might as well be on rollers. The world was made to measure. They were the true Chosen People.

As Greg was about to follow Galt downstairs, he felt a tap on his shoulder and spun round.

‘Well done,’ Dominic whispered, then gestured at his watch. ‘In a few minutes, the fireworks begin.’

Greg knew Galt had scheduled a fireworks display for 4.30 p.m., after darkness fell. But he was certain Dominic had something else in mind.

14

Gold. Gold everywhere. Like walking into a 24-carat treasure trove. Gold walls, a gold ceiling and gold floor, a gold table with a gold lamp and gold pens, gold chairs and an adjoining gold loo. Greg was astounded by

Galt's office, his golden sanctuary within his Golden Barge. It was mostly an illusion, of course – gold leaf rather than solid gold, but the effect was still overpowering, like entering King Midas's palace.

Ornate golden wreaths framed four portholes along the sidewall. Greg peered through one of them. It was getting dark, but it was impossible not to notice the garish pink barges with blacked-out windows anchored opposite. 'What are those?'

'Floating bordellos,' Galt said. 'Free enterprise...don't you love it? Absolutely anything is an opportunity for making money.'

'Even catastrophes?'

'*Especialy* catastrophes. In every disaster, there's gold to be found, often the biggest nuggets.'

'You love gold, don't you?'

'Well, it's incredibly rare, doesn't rust, and is virtually imperishable. Doesn't that make it worth our admiration? It's precious and exclusive in a gaudy world of cheap iron. Gold is for patricians, iron for plebs.'

Greg hated that look of conceit that so often appeared in Galt's eyes. He was also starting to hate the look of all the gold in this room. Practically the only non-golden object was a reproduction, he assumed, of Goya's famous painting *El Colosso* – the Colossus. It occupied the centre of the far wall and dominated the room. The picture, so dark and brooding, was breathtaking. A terrifying giant towered over a stampeding horde of people and animals, desperately fleeing from the monster.

'I see you admire the painting,' Galt said. 'I wanted the original, but the Prado in Madrid wouldn't sell it to me, so I've had to content myself with a copy, but perhaps not for much longer.'

'What do you mean?'

Galt sat down behind his desk then gestured towards the chair opposite. 'Take a seat, Gerard.'

The seat was hard and uncomfortable.

Galt smirked. 'You can't have been serious when you said the age of the super rich is coming to an end. We've never had it so good. The whole world has opened up for us like an oyster. We can reach in and pluck out the biggest, shiniest pearls it has to offer.'

'But that's exactly the moment when everything changes. In terms of the dialectic, it's when the counterforce – the antithesis – kicks in.'

'That's where you're wrong, Gerard. Let me tell you a few facts. Whatever you may believe, just six thousand people control the world and I know many of them personally. Ninety-four percent are men, and their average age is sixty. There are eleven hundred billionaires in the world and we have twice as much wealth as the poorest two and half billion people. The world's fifty largest financial institutions control a third of the world's assets. The world's two hundred and fifty biggest companies generate sales that are a third of the entire world's GDP. Just two percent of the world's population

own fifty percent of the world's wealth. I'm surprised it's not actually a bigger percentage, but there you go.

'And against all that wealth, all that power, concentrated in the hands of a tiny superclass, you think some absurd metaphysical dialectic can make a difference? Nothing important can happen in this world without our knowing about it. There's nothing to fear from nobodies.'

'Even if they outnumber you a million to one?'

'Numbers don't matter. When you multiply zero by a trillion, you still get zero. Ordinary people are zeros, aren't they?'

Greg tried to remain calm. The arrogance of these people had reached pathological proportions.

Galt pointed at the Goya painting. 'That's the reality there. The giant is invulnerable to the tiny people. One sweep of his hand and he'd destroy them all.' He smiled. 'Three years ago, I was told that the age of the super rich would come to an end this year. I was advised to make the most of it. A person codenamed "Colossus" – the smartest man in the world, supposedly – would be my nemesis. As if. You know what Shakespeare's Caesar said of Cassius, the leader of his assassins: "He thinks too much: such men are dangerous." I disagree. The men who think too much are the analysis paralysis brigade. I fear only men of action.'

'Yet Cassius succeeded.'

'Only because he recruited men of action such as Brutus.' Galt smiled again. 'Cassius said of Caesar, "Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus; and we petty men walk under his huge legs." That's the reality of it.' He jabbed his finger towards the painting. 'There's Caesar, and there I am too. That posturing intellectual from three years ago was no Cassius and no Colossus. He's vanished from the world without having made any impact at all.' Galt curled his thumb and index finger into a circle. 'He was nothing, like all the rest.'

'But the three years aren't up yet.'

'I told you, there's been no trace of this guy. There's more evidence for the existence of the Yeti or Bigfoot, or even the Loch Ness monster.'

'You think he's dead?'

'I don't care.'

'Yet you have that painting to remind you.'

'That's a coincidence. The man I most admire is Napoleon and he was called the Colossus of Europe. This painting shows the Spanish fleeing from him in blind panic.'

'But Napoleon lost the Spanish War.'

For an instant, anger flashed across Galt's face. 'It's a remarkable painting,' he said after a long pause. 'Soon, the Prada will be begging to sell it to me for half the price.'

Greg didn't have a chance to ask why. A whooshing sound outside was rapidly followed by a flash and deafening bang.

‘Ah, right on time.’ Galt glanced at his watch. ‘Son et lumière.’ He got up and went to one of the portholes. A spectacular fireworks display was drawing gasps from the watching crowd. The fireworks were launching from platforms on either side of the river and exploding directly over the Golden Barge. Dazzling, multicoloured sparks cascaded downwards like fiery rain.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ Galt said. ‘I’ve hired the top fireworks people on earth to put on this show.’

For ten minutes, Greg watched, entranced, as flowers of fire burst to life in the sky. ‘What’s that smell?’ he asked eventually. The last word was hardly out of his mouth before a fire alarm sounded. ‘Come on,’ Greg said, ‘we have to get out of here.’

15

Flames engulfed the velvet drapes on the main deck. A few people attempted to use fire extinguishers, but none of them worked. Greg saw Dominic standing near the curtains, his face oddly blank.

‘It’s catching fast,’ someone said.

‘We have to evacuate,’ Galt said. ‘Everyone onto the support boats.’ Climbing nets were thrown over the sides of the vessels and the rich and famous in their fancy dress costumes clambered down into the support vessels that had pushed against the sides of the barge.

Greg got into a motorboat with Batman, Spiderman and Superman. Dosh, Rex and Lucinda followed, getting into an adjacent craft. The ear-grating sirens of police cars, ambulances and fire engines replaced the firework explosions, while the blue flashing lights of the emergency services cast an eerie glow over the Thames.

Greg’s motorboat moved clear. He and the fake super heroes couldn’t take their eyes off the burning hulk. In the darkness, the flames were hideously lurid. Sparks flew out in every direction and momentarily danced on the surface of the water. The heat was intense.

Fire, fire, London’s burning. The half-remembered words of an old nursery rhyme flitted through Greg’s mind. *Fetch the engine, fetch the engine.*

In seconds, fireboats had surrounded the Golden Barge, with their hoses trained on it, but they weren’t spraying any water.

‘What’s going on?’ Batman asked Greg. ‘Why aren’t they dousing the flames?’

Greg overheard one of the fire fighters saying there was no water pressure. The motorboat moored and Greg climbed up the metal ladder at the mooring point. Cameras were flashing so rapidly the paparazzi were in danger of wearing out their fingers.

‘The bonfire of the vanities,’ a voice said from behind Greg. Dominic

stepped out of the shadows.

‘It was you, wasn’t it?’ Greg said.

‘You had your things to do and I had mine.’

‘The LLN ordered you to do it?’

‘Did you think the Golden Barge was the glory of mankind...or a few rich people rubbing everyone else’s noses in it as they always do? This was the vanity project of the most self-indulgent man on earth. Why should we stand by and applaud?’

‘Of course I object to the Golden Barge...but setting it on fire?’

‘Get real. The LLN isn’t some harmless bunch of naive protestors. This is a serious organisation that’s setting out to change things. Fuck it, to change the world. Are you too squeamish to help?’

‘But I didn’t think we’d be committing any crimes.’

‘And you think our enemies don’t commit crimes against us every day? No one died today, Greg.’

‘How do you know so much about the LLN’s plans?’

‘You don’t need to know my business, just as I don’t need to know yours. The only question is whether you’re for us or against us.’

Greg stared at the burning hulk, sinking in the centre of the Thames.

Galt walked past, flanked by two policemen. He stopped and nodded at Greg, then stared at Dominic, looking him up and down. Dominic stared back.

‘They say some sparks from the fireworks started the fire,’ Galt said. ‘I doubt we’ll ever find out for sure. The evidence is on its way to the bottom of the river.’ He shook his head. ‘An act of God.’ He let out a snort. ‘I guess he was jealous.’

‘A tough break,’ Greg said.

Galt didn’t answer and walked off with the policemen.

‘Did you see his face?’ Dominic said. ‘A picture to behold, huh?’

‘Is it wise for us to be seen together?’ Greg asked.

‘Why should anyone be paying attention to us?’

‘So what happens next?’

‘Anyone not committed to the cause will be replaced. The LLN only want revolutionaries.’ Dominic put his hand on Greg’s shoulder. ‘Are you a revolutionary, Greg?’ He tightened his grip. ‘Don’t sit on the fence. Be a man of action, someone who makes a difference.’

‘What about my job? I mean my real job, not this thing with Dosh and Rex.’

‘Fuck your job. The LLN will pay your expenses if you keep playing your part. This is a once in a lifetime chance.’

Smoke was irritating Greg’s eyes but he didn’t want to rub them and make them worse. The burning smell was awful.

‘Have you heard of the Tet Offensive?’ Dominic asked.

Greg nodded. ‘Vietnam.’

‘The LLN have copied the Vietnamese tactics. This is just the start. We’ll be launching coordinated events day after day to disrupt the fun and games of the rich and famous.’ He grabbed Greg’s arm. ‘So, what’s it to be?’

The Golden Barge finally disappeared beneath the Thames. One of the inflatable fat cats bobbed past. Greg remembered what Galt had said about the cats not being fat enough. And he remembered something else – the peasants fleeing from the giant in Galt’s painting.

‘I’m still in,’ he said.

16

‘That should be me,’ John Paul said. ‘I’m the somebody around here.’ He marched up and down in his tiny studio apartment. It was 9 o’clock on a freezing, misty night.

Greg was perched uneasily on the edge of the sofa, sipping from a bottle of lager. Chloe was curled up on a green bean bag in the corner. She was as irritated as John Paul. They’d just been watching the news, which was all about three big stories: the Golden Barge fire, the ongoing investigation of the murder of three billionaires, and the archaeological dig in Iran.

John Paul couldn’t believe that Greg had been at the event of the year, hobnobbing with the great and good, including John Galt. And he was flabbergasted that Greg had now got a job with Dosh and Rex. ‘I’m the salesman, the guy who’s going places. Those people should be clients of mine, buying things from me and earning me loads of commission.’

‘Well, you should have come with me when I went to see the LLN, shouldn’t you?’

‘But they wanted me to call myself a nobody.’

‘I can’t understand why you’re complaining. I was willing to do it and now interesting things have started happening to me. You refused, and nothing’s happening for you. I mean, come on, just say you’re a nobody. It’s only a word.’

‘No fucking way. Once a nobody always a nobody. Isn’t that right, Chloe?’

‘I still can’t believe Greg got on the Golden Barge,’ Chloe said. ‘It looked so beautiful. I would love to have been one of the artists who worked on it. What a tragedy that it went up in flames.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Greg said. ‘It was scary.’ He didn’t breathe a word about Dominic.

‘Galt must be livid. Think of all the money he’s pissed away.’

‘He’ll be covered by insurance.’

‘Even so, it’s still a mega bummer.’

‘Who gives a fuck about Galt?’ John Paul yelled. ‘I hate my job! I have to get out. What am I going to do?’

‘Join us,’ Greg said. ‘I’m excited for the first time in years.’ Another thought occurred to him. Sometimes when he was playing his LLN part, he felt far more eloquent and articulate than normal, as though the words were flowing from some perfect inner self. He felt more true to himself, more like the person he wanted it to be.

‘Why not give it a try, John Paul?’ Chloe said. ‘I’m intrigued by the LLN. They seem much more powerful than I first thought. Maybe we’ll get lucky like Greg did.’

‘God, not you too,’ John Paul snapped. ‘Fuck the LLN. They shouldn’t be going around telling people they’re nobodies.’ He shook his head. ‘Don’t you get it? Once you say that word, you really are a nobody. That’s exactly what the rich want from us – for us to admit we’re nothing.’ He waved his hands in exasperation. ‘Don’t you remember that old movie *On the Waterfront*? Remember Marlon Brando’s character? Remember that speech he gave to his brother? “You don’t understand!” he said, “I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody instead of a bum, which is what I am.” We should be contenders too, we should have class, we should be aiming for the big prizes. The LLN are trying to make us bums.’ His face turning purple, he stomped off to the toilet.

‘I’m worried about him,’ Chloe said. ‘His job’s not going well. I think they might give him the boot soon. He’s envious of you.’

Greg was astounded. The idea of anyone envying him was absurd. He was just an actor, playing a role that wouldn’t last long. He was sure to be rumbled and humiliated. His mobile phone rang. *New Number* flashed up.

‘Hello, is that Mr Lambert?’

For a second, Greg was about to say, ‘Who?’ before remembering his alter ego. ‘Yes, speaking.’

‘Lucinda here. I’ve been instructed to invite you to Wembley Stadium tomorrow night. A private box has been reserved.’ She explained that Rex was captaining an England all-stars team versus a European Union all-stars team for a charity match in aid of Disaster Relief. All the best players in the world would be there. Dosh and several WAGs would be watching the match from a luxury hospitality box, and Greg was invited to join them.

Greg noticed Chloe trying to listen in. Just a few days ago, he would have loved the attention she was paying him, but now he realised how much he enjoyed listening to Lucinda’s voice. It was a pity she obviously didn’t trust him.

‘You fooled them,’ she said, ‘but don’t think you can do the same to me. I’ll be watching every step you take, Mr Lambert. Think of tomorrow night as a test. Meanwhile, I’ll be doing a lot of digging. I’ll take up your references. You better pray they check out.’ She clicked off.

‘Good news?’ Chloe asked. ‘Wow, that’s fantastic,’ she said when Greg explained what was on the agenda. ‘Going to that LLN meeting was the best thing you ever did.’

Greg smiled, but he couldn't shake off the unease he felt about the whole thing. Things were moving fast and he was struggling to keep up.

John Paul emerged from the toilet and went to the fridge to get another bottle of lager. 'Fuck right off,' he said when he heard Greg's latest news. 'I need to sort myself out pronto. Life is passing me by.'

'Me too,' Chloe sighed.

Greg didn't like the atmosphere. 'I'm knackered,' he said. 'I'm going to have an early night. I'll catch up with you guys later.'

Chloe waved. John Paul just stared.

As soon as he got outside, Greg phoned Dominic and passed on what Lucinda had said.

'Excellent,' Dominic said. 'It's strange, but the LLN told me this would happen. I thought it would take much longer to infiltrate Dosh and Rex's life, but I was assured it wouldn't be a problem. And don't worry about your CV. I've been told everything is taken care of.'

17

Greg hadn't been to Wembley Stadium before – he could never afford it – so he was delighted at getting this chance to pay his first visit. He wanted to have the full experience, including seeing the team getting off their coach and heading for the changing rooms.

He stood in the midst of a large group of fans all wearing England replica strips and draped with St George's flags. They had been allowed into the huge covered parking area to greet the players. *Sky TV* cameras were there, and spokespeople for various charities that would be benefiting from the event. Greg couldn't help yawning. Last night, he had gone through all of his briefing notes again, trying to learn them as thoroughly as his lines for an acting role.

When the team coach arrived, Greg expected a cheer, but it didn't come. Some of the charity people applauded politely, their claps echoing feebly in the cavernous parking zone. They tried to get a cheer going, without success. Greg found it quite funny.

The England players trooped off the luxury coach, led by the manager and Rex. They seemed perplexed by the lack of noise. As Rex stopped to do an interview, fans surged forward and surrounded him. Greg hung back. The fans whipped off the flags they had over their shoulders and held them up as banners – with slogans daubed on them – in full camera shot.

Greg stared at Rex, at the sudden confusion he saw in the star's eyes. There were three styles of banner. One said, 'I kick a ball around a field.' The second said, 'I wouldn't kick a ball for less than £10 million a year.' The third said, 'Ball kickers are more important than doctors and teachers.'

Rex just stood there, looking like an idiot. Greg squirmed, memories of

bad auditions flooding back to him. Maybe Rex deserved it after the easy ride he'd been given by the media for so long, but Greg couldn't help feeling sorry for him. Rex was like the old champ finding himself punch drunk and hanging on the ropes, wondering where his career had gone.

'Let's get one of these fans to tell us what this is about,' the TV interviewer said. He planted his microphone in front of the nearest demonstrator.

'Harry Prince is a footballer,' a man said. 'For kicking a ball around a field, he gets paid the same amount as three hundred schoolteachers – enough teachers for ten thousand children. If we combined the pay of all the star footballers who'll be kicking a ball around Wembley tonight, we'd have enough money to teach three hundred thousand children. So, there's the issue. Should we pay for our children's future or watch grown men chasing a ball around a field?'

Greg almost nodded.

'But this is a charity event,' the interviewer said. 'You're harming good causes with this protest.'

'Charity is how the greedy disguise their greed,' the man replied. 'It's the cloak they put on when they try to justify their wealth. "Oh, look," they say, "look how kind and generous we are giving money to these good causes. Aren't we wonderful?" When our organisation takes charge, not a single charity will be left. The money saved by getting rid of the greedy will be used on schools, hospitals, research and improving everyone's standard of living.'

Greg liked the sound of that. It seemed so reasonable.

'And what organisation are you?' the interviewer asked.

'We are the League for the Liberation of Nobodies.'

'What did you mean when you said you were going to get rid of the greedy?'

The demonstrator didn't answer. All of his colleagues started chanting: 'We kick a ball, we kick a ball, we kick a ball. Give us money, money, money. We kick a ball, we kick a ball...'

'What do you think of this?' The interviewer turned back to Rex and gestured at the demonstrators.

'I love my football and I'm here tonight to raise money for charity. What's wrong with that?'

'And what about your pay, Rex? It's well known that you're on ten million a year. Why don't you give the bulk of that to charity if you're so keen on good causes? Aren't the demonstrators right? You're doing this to raise your profile and make yourself look good. It's all about you.'

Greg was impressed by how Rex was managing to stay cool and field the questions quite effectively. Then again, he'd probably heard them many times before. 'I get paid the going rate for what I do,' he said. 'I'm not motivated by money.'

‘Then why do you negotiate such lucrative contracts? Why not ask for a lower salary?’

‘Do you ask for less?’

‘That’s not the point, is it?’

Greg noticed an official in a blue suit approaching. He pulled Rex away, to a chorus of boos.

‘Thanks, Rex,’ the interviewer said with obvious sarcasm as Rex and the other players were hustled towards the changing rooms. The door was firmly shut once they’d gone in, and guarded by two men. A team of security people and policemen belatedly appeared and escorted the LLN protestors out of the stadium.

Greg stood there for a moment. He couldn’t believe what had happened. An idol had been dragged from his plinth. It seemed impossible in this celebrity age, but the LLN had managed to accomplish it. They had targeted one of the highest gods in the pantheon and won. Not quite the storming of the Bastille, but Greg could see the revolution had well and truly begun.

He made his way to the luxury box where Dosh and her party were enjoying pre-match champagne and canapés. As he climbed a staircase, he couldn’t help being impressed by how good the LLN were at infiltrating these events. They were always one step ahead of the game.

He was curious that he still referred to them as ‘they’. He still didn’t feel properly part of this. Dominic had taken to it instantly while he seemed to be holding back. Maybe he was afraid of where all this was going. The LLN weren’t some group of hopeless, heads-in-the-clouds left-wingers but serious, resourceful, well informed and well organised revolutionaries.

When Greg entered the hospitality box, he found a host of WAGs clustered around Dosh. They were all wearing Ray-Ban Wayfarer shades, in assorted bright colours, and all staring at a plasma screen showing playbacks of the LLN protest.

‘Did you see the way they treated my Rex?’ Dosh said. ‘It’s disgusting. This is a charity event, for Christ’s sake.’

The other WAGs nodded furiously and cheeped like sparrows. The dawn chorus of dying brain cells. Greg made for the sanctuary of the far corner of the room, where a waiter was pouring glasses of Krug champagne then transferring them to a silver tray for distribution to the WAGs.

Christ, I needed that, Greg thought, after taking a gulp from the nearest glass. The waiter scowled at him. ‘Sorry,’ Greg said.

‘So, you check out,’ a voice said. Lucinda had appeared beside Greg. She was wearing a figure-hugging red dress and black stilettos. ‘Impeccable references, Mr Lambert. Almost too good. I mean, you’ve worked for some of the top companies, and they all said you did a fantastic job.’

Greg thought it wise not to say too much. What was for sure was that the LLN had done their job again. Lucinda was the type of person who would have checked the references thoroughly. She might even know some of the

referees...people like John Galt.

‘It’s odd,’ Lucinda said. ‘For someone so apparently smart and successful, you’re rather hesitant, fearful even. Sometimes I think you’re going to jump out of your skin.’

‘I guess that’s why people trust me. I don’t pretend to be anything I’m not. I have the same anxieties they have.’

‘Well, there must be something about you that people like, but I don’t get it. I like alpha males, and you’re certainly not one.’ She took a glass from the champagne tray and walked away.

Greg watched her go. Beauty shouldn’t be so cruel, he thought, yet it wouldn’t be so alluring without that cold edge, that heartless blade pressed against the neck, would it? He wanted a beautiful, stylish, intelligent girlfriend. He wanted it for the simplest of reasons – only a worthy man could get such a girl. Then he felt shallow and pathetic. And he wouldn’t know what to do one with a top class girlfriend anyway.

‘The teams are coming out,’ the waiter said.

Greg and the WAGs left the box and took their seats. Greg was seated beside Lucinda, which she seemed to resent judging by her frowns. She made sure she crossed her legs in the opposite direction. No mirroring, no sign of any warmth towards him.

The stadium was full, but there was a peculiar atmosphere. Rex led out the teams in the golden cap he’d recently been awarded for representing England a hundred times. The cap seemed to Greg to be the height of pretentiousness, an ego trip gone mad.

The teams lined up for the national anthems: *God Save the Queen* for the England all-stars, and Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* for the Europe all-stars. At least there was no question about which was the superior anthem. Even those who hated Europe couldn’t bring themselves to hate the European anthem. And Greg liked the strip of the European players – blue socks, shorts and tops with gold trim, and a circular badge of gold stars. Some people in the crowd waved the blue flag with gold starry circle of the European Union, but the England flag massively outnumbered those.

The game started and was particularly uneventful, even for a charity game. Greg found himself repeatedly yawning. In the 43rd minute, a European defender stuck out his leg a little too far and England’s centre forward toppled theatrically. *Penalty*. A half-hearted cheer rippled round the ground before fading into silent apathy. Rex strode forward to take the penalty kick, to the delight of Dosh who blew him extravagant kisses. Lucinda turned away and, for the first time, Greg realised there was no love lost between the two.

As Rex prepared to take the penalty, hundreds of fans behind the goal held up the same types of banners the LLN demonstrators had used earlier. To the tune of *Daydream Believer* by *The Monkees*, the LLN supporters started a devastating chant:

**Cheer up Harry Prince,
Oh, what can it mean
To a rich bastard
And a shit human being?**

Over and over again, they sang it, louder and louder each time round.

Rex was stunned. On Wembley's huge screens, his face was captured: agonised, haunted, disbelieving. He ran forward and belted the ball, slipping as his boot made contact. The ball soared high over the bar. Everyone jeered and mocked. They all joined in with the LLN chant and it reached epic loudness. The referee ended the half there and then and the players fled for the tunnel. Greg had never seen anything like it.

Dosh was on her feet, screaming and swearing at the crowd. Several WAGs were in tears.

'Oh, for God's sake,' Lucinda said, rolling her eyes.

Rex was substituted five minutes into the second half. He trooped off dejectedly to a chorus of deafening boos. Many LLN protestors held up placards showing one of Rex's most notorious quotes after he'd signed a £50 million five-year contract with Chelsea: 'This has nothing to do with greed. This was about reaching the football decision right for me.' Dosh, in a display of solidarity with her husband, made great play of getting up to leave. Some fans nearby told her to fuck off, and she reciprocated. Within seconds, the whole stadium was waving her goodbye, with that famous footballing taunt of, 'We can see you sneaking out.' Followed by, 'Dosh takes it up the arse.'

'Bastards,' Dosh muttered. 'You don't deserve us.'

Greg tried not to chuckle.

Lucinda hurriedly guided her away before she could cause any more trouble. 'Oh, you'd better come too,' she said to Greg. 'It's time to prove if you're of any use.'

18

Greg gazed out over the Thames, illuminated against the dark night. He never thought he'd be standing on the balcony of the penthouse suite of London's most exclusive residential tower. Dosh and Rex had the top three floors, with the lowest of the three reserved for their staff – Lucinda getting the pick of the staff accommodation. The middle floor was dedicated to 'fun', while the top penthouse suite was Dosh and Rex's dream home. Located on the Chelsea riverside, Enterprise Tower was sixty floors high and home to a collection of super rich celebrities, financial whiz kids and big shots in the media world.

'Come in, Mr Lambert,' Lucinda said. 'Jenny and Harry are ready for

you now.'

Greg went inside, into the palatial sitting room. It had an ultra-modern fireplace, 'aged' floorboards, and a sixty-inch plasma TV, two stylish white leather sofas, a glass coffee table, and an elegant bookcase full of prize-winning literary novels, which looked like they had never been touched. There were several bold, colourful paintings – by up-and-coming artists, Lucinda said – and a few abstract steel sculptures.

Greg made himself comfortable on one of the sofas. Lucinda sat beside him, while Dosh and Rex sat opposite. A girl in a smart black uniform came in and served espressos all round.

'What's happening to the world?' Rex shook his head. 'That was the most humiliating experience of my life. I need to understand what's going on. The LLN seem to have sprung up out of nowhere.'

'So, what should we do about these protestors, Future Man?' Lucinda asked. 'But you think they'll win, don't you? You're not much help, really, are you?'

'Give him a chance,' Dosh said. 'Gerard was brave enough to say what he thought, and Harry and I admire that. If he tells us how he sees things playing out, maybe we can do something about it.'

Greg was surprised by how sensible Dosh sounded. She wasn't as stupid as she sometimes made out, or as the media usually labelled her. Just yesterday they had written a story about her having a penchant for shampoo containing semen and truffles. 'Well, I think I can explain what they're doing,' he said. 'They're waging a war of signs.' Reams of the LLN's briefing notes lit up in his mind.

'A what?' Lucinda snapped.

Greg decided to quote almost verbatim what the LLN had written. 'Everything in the world is about signs,' he said. 'Every word that comes out of your mouth is a sign...of your accent, your education, your class, the cultural scene you're in, the crowd you belong to, or whatever. The clothes you wear are signs of your taste, your wealth, your individuality. How you move, the makeup you wear, the designer items you choose, how you style your hair, the colour you choose for your lipstick...they're all signs. Where you choose to live, what furniture you select, what art you buy: they all send out messages about you. Signs are really all there is.'

He could see that Dosh and Rex were looking at him as though he were some sort of genius, while Lucinda's face was tripping her.

'Advertising is the industry that's all about signs,' he went on. 'From the start of a commercial to the end, all you're watching are signs. An advertiser who wants a product to be perceived as cool simply needs to show a cool actor endorsing it. The actor's coolness rubs off on the product by association.'

'Here's another example. Glastonbury festival used to be the hottest ticket in town. It sold out in hours. Even if you hated it, you had to be there.'

The rain and the mud made it even more memorable. It was so cool it was heading for absolute zero. Then, wam, it wasn't cool anymore. The cool gang had moved on. Now people saw Glastonbury for what it was: corporate, soulless, the opposite of rock 'n' roll. The idea of being in a muddy field with tens of thousands of anti-music fans became grotesque. There you were, standing at the back of the quagmire, watching tiny figures on a far distant stage. Next to the stage was a huge screen. Well, you might as well be watching on telly at home, right? And the sound quality was shit, and the bands were crap. And just as quickly as Glastonbury became hot, it turned the opposite – the place where no one wanted to be seen, the festival to be avoided like the plague. In the war of cool, it takes only a slight rise in temperature and you're fucked. At least until a new generation comes along and rediscovers the dinosaurs.'

'This is all very interesting, Mr Lambert,' Lucinda said, 'but how does it relate to the LLN and their so-called war against us?'

'They're subverting your signs, replacing them with new signs: negative, uncool ones. Look at what they did to Rex at Wembley.'

Rex winced.

'Rex is a sign of wealth, glamour and success,' Greg said. 'The LLN are wrecking that sign by associating it with other signs that people find pathetic. They simply told the truth: "I kick a ball around a field", "I get paid ten million pounds for kicking a ball", and so on. All true...and all absurd. We see the reality of our obsession with Rex and football. I mean, why are we paying a guy ten million a year to kick a ball? We don't pay that to prime ministers and presidents, to scientists curing cancer or discovering the secrets of the universe, to philosophers changing our perception of life. Yet we pay it to guys running around a field with the aim of sticking a small plastic ball into a net. If we see what's going on – what's really going on – we realise we're insane, or the victims of a huge con. We're ashamed of ourselves and we transfer our shame to Rex. So now he's no longer the guy we aspire to be; he's a conman. He gets paid a fortune for doing something dumb, and we're the suckers who pay for it.' Greg held out his hands apologetically towards Rex. 'No offence. I'm just saying what the LLN are thinking.'

Rex nodded, but he looked shell shocked.

'Christ, that's powerful,' Dosh said. 'How do we fight back?'

'I'm not sure you can. Celebrities and advertisers use illusion; the LLN use truth. That's much more dangerous.'

'No.' Lucinda glared at Greg. 'Nothing beats illusion. We need to find smarter illusions to replace the old ones, and we need to attack the "truths" of the LLN. If it's a war of signs, we need to find more effective ones. It's been done before. When the Catholic Church was threatened by the austerity of the Protestant Reformation, it struck back in the Counter Reformation with the baroque – ridiculously expensive and grandiose art and architecture. The baroque style was totally over-the-top but colourful, joyous, and romantic. It

appealed to the imagination. It was the antidote to the killjoy world of the Protestants. The LLN are the new Puritans, and we need to be the Counter Reformation. We'll be blinger than ever. Bigger, better, and more expensive.'

'You don't give in, do you?' Greg said. 'Maybe it's better to start adjusting to the new world and go with the flow.'

'You think we'll just give up everything we've worked so hard for?' Dosh said. 'We won't let nobodies beat us. OK, some of them might be a bit smarter than we thought, but we're smarter.'

'But the outcome of the dialectic is inevitable.'

'What is this, uh, dialectic – is that right? – that you keep going on about?' Rex asked.

'It's a form of logic. In a sense, it comes down to saying that everything contains a fatal contradiction, the seed of its own destruction.'

'I don't understand,' Dosh said.

'OK, think about fame. It's so good that everyone wants to be famous, but if everyone were famous then fame would be meaningless. It works only if a few people have it. But then all those who want it but can't have it will resent it. It doesn't take much for them to turn on anyone who has it but slips up. So the famous simultaneously become ridiculously admired and worshipped and ridiculously hunted and hounded. Fame goes from being a joy to a curse. It's both desirable and hateful. Anyone who has it frequently wishes they didn't.'

Dosh and Rex looked at each other and half nodded.

'Here's another example: boom and bust economics. The boom always contains a fatal contradiction that leads to the bust. Banks lend too much to too many borrowers, which leads to excessive growth, and then interest rates go up to curb inflation and then the borrowers can no longer afford their repayments and start defaulting. Then the banks begin to lose money and can no longer lend. Growth becomes recession. Or companies start offering ridiculous incentives for good performance and no disincentives for poor performance, and people start taking ridiculous risks since they have nothing to lose. When people say you can't buck the market what they ought to say is you can't buck dialectics.'

Greg was amazed at how all of this stuff was flowing so smoothly. It was as though he'd fully absorbed every scrap of the LLN's information. He once saw Darren Green doing a TV programme where he taught a guy to subconsciously memorise huge volumes of material from an encyclopaedia. He wondered if he'd somehow managed the same trick. He could see that Dosh and Rex were impressed, and increasingly convinced. Perhaps even Lucinda was having second thoughts about him.

'Politics, war, religion, fashion, economics, entertainment, sex – you name it, it's dialectical,' Greg said. 'Even love is dialectical.'

‘Why have the LLN picked on Harry?’ Dosh asked. ‘He used to be the hero of all those fans who were jeering him.’

‘Rex is the highest paid player in the world. Fans think that players just keep asking for more and more, and prices keep going up and up to pay for it. Fans are being priced out of the game they love. It’s the classic boom and bust scenario. Players have never had it so good, but the better it gets for them, the more they alienate their fans. And any business that pisses off its customers is doomed. The anger of the fans is focused on the richest player – Rex. What you saw today is the start of the bust phase. It’s inevitable.’

‘There must be something we can do,’ Dosh said.

‘Sure. If Rex announces he’s taking a fifty percent pay cut, everything will change.’

‘That would affect every deal we made,’ Dosh said. ‘We’d be a laughing stock. People would start taking the piss. Jumped-up nobodies would be getting more money than us. It’s not going to happen.’

‘Like I said,’ Greg answered, ‘boom and bust is inevitable. Nothing stops the dialectic.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ Lucinda said. ‘There’s no such thing as the dialectic. There are just people, and powerful people always beat weaker people.’

‘You sound like Galt.’

‘He’s the richest man on earth. No one messes with him. Presidents are scared of him.’ She leaned forward. ‘And what about you? Whose side are you on, Mr Lambert? You sometimes sound as though you support the LLN.’

Greg didn’t answer. If he really thought about it, maybe he was no longer so sure which side he was on. He was supposed to be working for the LLN, but he was enjoying being with people like Galt, Lucinda, Dosh and Rex. He felt more alive in their company. If he could be this character all the time, he wouldn’t mind watching the movie of his life. ‘I just focus on the future,’ he said after a moment. ‘I don’t support anyone. You’re paying me to advise you, not to be on your side.’

Dosh smiled. ‘When I think about it, there’s really not too much to worry about. This is just a bad case of celebrity envy. Galt used to tell me that there was a stock market in celebrity. Sometimes your shares are going up and everyone’s screaming, “buy” and at other times your shares are on the slide and people are selling. It will sort itself out.’

‘Another thing Galt liked to say,’ Rex added, ‘is that it’s never about selling yourself. It’s the opposite – it’s about buying yourself. If you do, your stock goes up and others want to buy too. Galt says it’s always worth the investment. Maybe we’ve been letting things slip. We need to invest more in our brand.’

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ Greg said diplomatically. ‘Excuse me for a moment, I need to go to the loo.’ He stood up and looked around. ‘Er, which way?’ Dosh pointed him in the right direction and he walked off, amazed he had said ‘loo’ instead of toilet. What was happening to him?

He almost burst out laughing when he discovered that the toilet had a red carpet leading to it. When he came out, he found Lucinda.

‘You’re Mr Fence Sitter, aren’t you?’ she said. ‘That’s your big problem. You don’t grab life and make it do your bidding. Galt does exactly that while you’re just standing there on the sidelines watching it all go by, blabbering on about some dialectic that absolves you of all responsibility for doing anything.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Welcome to real life. I had a schoolteacher who used to say, “Survival isn’t compulsory”. It’s time people like you wised up.’

Greg didn’t respond.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Lucinda said. ‘Jenny and Harry like you. I don’t know why, but they do. They find you reassuring. They think you tell it the way you see it, but I still think there’s something wrong. You’re up to something. I just can’t put my finger on it.’

‘Well, it’s lucky I work for them and not for you.’ Greg wondered why Lucinda hated him so much.

‘They’re talking about asking you to move in here,’ she said. ‘They think they might need a lot of advice from you, and want you to be available at all times.’

‘I’d need to think about it.’

‘Indecision again? That’s a very unsexy quality in a man.’

Greg felt tongue-tied again. He gazed at Lucinda’s bee-sting lips and had a ridiculous impulse to kiss them.

‘So now you’re one of the gang if you want to be,’ Lucinda said. ‘The world is your oyster.’

Greg didn’t feel that way. You had to be used to oysters. Otherwise, they made you sick. And the longer he spent in the company of Dosh and Rex, the more likely he was to be rumbled.

‘Come and see this,’ Dosh shouted.

When Greg and Lucinda returned to the main room, the news was on, showing pictures of John Galt. He was standing outside his towering HQ in central London, surrounded by LLN protestors holding up more of their sarcastic placards. These ones said, ‘I am very rich.’

Greg was stunned by how powerful that message was. It was unquestionably true and yet it managed to suggest that wealth was shabby and shameful. It also gave out a second message: that the poor were much better off than the rich, and had friends, community, solidarity. There was Galt – isolated, glum – and there the LLN protestors were, a band of brothers and sisters, united and obviously having fun.

‘See, we’re not the only ones having problems,’ Rex said. ‘Now they’ve targeted John. He’s not going to take that lying down.’

On screen, Galt peered into the nearest camera. ‘If the authorities don’t take action against these LLN demonstrators, I will.’

The activists behind him immediately turned their placards round. 'I talk big,' their placards read.

19

Greg, sitting on his black leather swivel seat, momentarily turned away from the TV. He stared out of the sliding doors at the back of his Hoxton studio apartment, facing onto a narrow concrete pavement and a tangle of overgrown bushes and weeds. Sometimes, at night, when his curtains were drawn, couples fucked against the sliding doors. Maybe the cold surface had some sort of aphrodisiac property.

Greg turned back to the TV. Events were moving fast. The war of signs was in full swing. Was this the LLN's Tet Offensive that Dominic had promised?

Outside posh shoe shops, LLN activists were filmed holding up placards saying, 'My shoes are very expensive', as well-shod women emerged carrying bright boxes containing their treasured new shoes. Outside upmarket restaurants, there were demonstrators with placards reading, 'I pay a lot so that I don't have to eat with the likes of you.' Outside cinemas the placards read, 'I watch things that never happened.' Outside TV studios: 'I watch other people because I'm doing nothing with my own life.'

The whole of London was frothing like a cauldron. Roving camera crews, many sent by TV companies from all over the world, were revealing that slogans were appearing everywhere across the city. LLN graffiti artists had got in on the act. Huge advertising billboards were defaced with taunting slogans: "I get a million pounds for being photographed in my underwear"; "I exploit you because you want me"; "I would never eat this muck, but, hey, I'm getting paid a fortune"; "I want more"; "I want"; "I"; "Give to me"; "Worship me"; "I am the Lord, your God"; "Do not take my name in vain"; "I am your dream"; "You will never be my friend"; "Secretly, I detest you".

Biblical statements were scrawled on the sides of churches, temples, mosques and synagogues: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set thee free"; "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" "I have been a stranger in a strange land"; "Let my people go"; "A land flowing with milk and honey"; "A dreamer of dreams"; "Hewers of wood and drawers of water"; "How are the mighty fallen?"; "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity"; "Pride goeth before destruction"; "Blessed are the poor: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

The previous evening, flash mobs had materialised at all sorts of events, chanting furiously for a few moments and then dispersing just as quickly as they'd appeared. Every function involving the rich and famous was disrupted. The hit and run tactics were proving devastating. The commentariat/chatterati – all the self-important people who wrote self-

serving columns in newspapers – didn't know if they should support the protestors or oppose them, but they all agreed that the police were losing control of the capital. No one was sure what it all meant, where it was leading. It was a revolution in all but name. There were no guns and no bodies, and yet everyone knew change was in the air. The nation was at a tipping point.

Greg was amazed. How could it have happened so quickly? It was as though some valve had been released and rivers of pent-up frustration were flooding out. The LLN had made an instantaneous connection with the people. Greg wondered what Dosh and Rex were making of it. At least they knew they were far from alone.

There was a loud rap on the door. Greg got up from his seat, trundled over and pulled it open.

'Hi,' Dominic said.

'Hi there, come in.'

'It's all kicking off, isn't it?' Dominic's eyes were shining.

Greg showed him to a seat and asked if he wanted a bottle of lager. Dominic nodded. Greg brought out two bottles from the fridge, and grabbed a tube of Pringles crisps. He was about to switch off the TV, but Dominic asked him to keep it on.

'I love watching the news now,' Dominic said. 'It's really happening. The revolution is here.'

Dosh and Rex were shown arriving at a fashion event. As soon as they stepped out of their limousine, they were greeted by LLN activists silently waving placards. 'Good publicity,' one of the placards read. 'What has this got to do with football?' another said.

When a couple of models came over to welcome the star couple, the protestors held up placards saying, 'I get paid to put on clothes', and, 'I'm rich because I look the way you want to.'

When Lucinda stood next to Dosh and Rex to speak on their behalf, some of the activists lined up behind her. This time their placards, clearly visible over her shoulder, said, 'I'll say anything for money'; 'I will justify anything if the price is right.'

Lucinda glanced at the placards then became flustered. It took her a moment to regain her composure. 'Jenny and Harry are here today to show their support for British fashion. They are keen to promote the work of innovative new British designers. It's astonishing that some people see fit to protest about this. They're going to cost jobs in the fashion industry with tactics like this. Foreign investors will turn away.'

A placard was cleverly manoeuvred in front of her. 'I don't believe a word I say,' it read.

Dominic roared with laughter. 'Look, she's just like one of those attractive females the Israeli Defence Force uses to justify their latest atrocity. They say the most preposterous things to explain away their war

crimes, and they actually think no one's paying attention because we're far too busy finding their spokesperson so pretty. No one shoots a pretty messenger. And no one listens to the message. How fucking dumb do they think we are? Have you noticed how PR companies always use attractive men and women to get their message across, as though the ugliest words can be transformed by passing through beautiful lips? Every time you see an attractive spokesperson, you can be sure you're about to hear the biggest pile of horseshit.'

Greg couldn't help agreeing. He'd seen it so many times. Why did the news have to be presented by pretty women? And what about the chummy double act on the local news: the attractive young woman and her flirtatious middle-aged male colleague? Who invented all of these ludicrous rules?

'So, are you moving in with them?' Dominic asked. Greg had phoned him the previous night to tell him about the offer. Dominic urged him to go ahead, but Greg wanted to sleep on it.

'I suppose so,' Greg said. 'For one thing, I want to get out of this shit hole for a while. I've packed a few things.'

Dominic sniggered. 'From the shit hole to the hell hole, huh? It's going to be nightmare city at Dosh and Rex's soon.'

'Have you heard something?'

'There's a plan, but I can't give you all the details. Anyway, the LLN want to have someone on the ground to report on what Dosh and Rex are doing, how they're reacting to our campaign.' He slapped Greg on the back. 'I love our next event. It's called *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*'

'What?'

'It's the name of an old book and film about a dance marathon in America during the Depression when people had to do crazy things to earn a buck. The LLN see it as a metaphor for the way we're living now. Our boring jobs are a never-ending marathon. We're all chasing a buck. We're slaves to money, and then we die. We've exhausted ourselves dancing to our bosses' tune. As the guy says at the end of the movie, "They shoot horses, don't they?" We need someone to put us out of our misery. But we're not going to shoot anyone, just show them the absurdity of their mad dancing. We'll flood the City and Canary Wharf with LLN activists who will all start dancing at a prearranged signal. We're going to use ghetto blasters to pump out three songs over and over again.'

'Which songs?'

'You'll love them: Abba's *Money Money Money*, Pink Floyd's *Money*, and the Beatles' *Money That's What I Want*.'

Greg smiled.

'We're not going to let up for a second. Our LLN activists will stand outside every opulent bank and grand HQ of corporate Britain and hand out copies of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*. They'll yell the author's slogan, "Being the story of twelve months in hell, told by one of the damned,

and written down by Robert Tressell.” They’ll tell toffee nosed bankers to read the section entitled *The Great Money Trick*. They’ll surround Lord Snooty business leaders and order them to read about exploitative capitalists. And if they see any priests, they’ll make them read the section on the hypocrisy of Christians, how people like them turned their religion on its head and made it a rich man’s faith where the poor are mocked for their poverty.

‘LLN activists will stand outside Tube stations distributing pamphlets with extracts from famous philosophy and politics books. We’ll be highlighting Nietzsche, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Rousseau, Locke, Plato, Marx, Baudrillard, and Derrida. We’re trying to recreate the political excitement of the revolutionary days of heroes like Thomas Paine.

‘Our graffiti artists are going to cover buildings and billboards with inspirational quotations and lines from famous novels, plays and poems. We want to bombard everyone with cultural references, to overload people’s minds. And we want physical activity too. One thing we’re supporting is the Fuck Your Way to Freedom Movement.’

‘Eh?’

Dominic handed Greg a pamphlet. ‘Have a read...’

Fucking ought to have changed the world in 1968. What went wrong? Just not enough fuckers for one thing. And, of course, the System – the state’s repressive, anti-fucking machinery – kicked into action to stamp out free love.

Fucking is subversion. Fucking is anarchy. Fucking is revolt. Fuck your way to freedom!

The Paris riots in 1968 started because male students couldn’t visit female students in their dormitories. A revolution almost happened because smart, sexy young Parisians weren’t getting enough. Female sexuality, as the ancient Greeks knew, is the essence of chaos and rebellion. We say, free the cunt. Let the cunt smile at the world and swallow it whole in a carnal feast that blows all our minds. All hail the cunt. All hail the cock and cunt.

The ‘fuck your way to liberation’ movement is Nietzsche versus Christianity, or Dionysus against the Crucified, to use Nietzsche’s own phrase. People who hate fucking (the religious, the materialistic, the greedy capitalists) control the world. Fucking is opposed to rules and regulations, to greed, to material possessions, to 9-5 jobs, to exploitative employers controlling enfeebled employees, to small, antisocial family units living in their selfish little boxes (their picket-fence houses and 4x4 cars). Fucking is community, sharing, anti-materialism, anti-capitalism, anti-mortgages and anti-tedious jobs that enrich bosses who’ve never done a stroke of work in their lives.

The Englishman's home is his castle. Fuck the Englishman's home, and fuck his castle too!

“If you want to get rich, start a religion!” Ron L Hubbard.

The “fuck your way to freedom” movement isn’t a religion and it won’t get you rich, but it will change the world. Abolish the tedious world of your parents trapped in their mindless mortgage mentality. Escape with a smile on your face; escape through fucking.

They called Aleister Crowley the *Great Beast*. They said he was the most wicked man in the world. Why? Because he enjoyed fucking. Read about the occult, go to orgies, celebrate Dionysus, the raucous god of intoxication. Change your perspective and change the world. You are not an automaton. You can fuck your way to freedom.

Dionysus or Christ? – that's the choice. Sex or anti-sex. Liberation or repression.

Fuck the Ten Commandments.

‘Wow,’ Greg said. ‘This could catch on.’ He laughed. ‘Especially amongst teenagers.’

‘We’re attacking from every angle. We want to throw the whole of London, and then the whole country, into ferment. The bosses want us to be slaves to daily routines, to long commuting journeys that drain all our enthusiasm and energy. They want us to be slaves to debt – mortgages and credit cards – that lock us into their dreary jobs to pay off the loans. The last thing they want is for us to have any fun, to be free, to be human’

‘You’re totally into this, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve never felt so alive. I was told I passed my initiation test with flying colours on the Golden Barge. I’ve also been told that the LLN ruling council want to choose someone to be their public face. I’m hoping it’s me. I deserve it. I’ve worked so hard.’

There was another knock on the door. This time it was John Paul and Chloe, looking ashen faced.

‘Has something happened?’ Greg asked.

Chloe glanced at Dominic and made eyes.

Dominic stood up. ‘I’d better go.’ As he walked past Chloe and John Paul, he gave them a friendly nod. ‘Hi guys, have you joined the revolution yet?’

‘Not a good time,’ Chloe said quietly.

‘It’s always a good time,’ Dominic replied. ‘The revolution needs everyone it can get.’

‘Fuck off, why don’t you?’ John Paul snarled.

Dominic stared at him for a moment then walked out of the apartment, pulling the door shut behind him.

‘Tosser,’ John Paul hissed.

‘What’s wrong, guys?’ Greg asked.

‘He’s, er...’ Chloe stopped in mid sentence.

‘I’ve been sacked, OK?’ John Paul slumped onto the sofa. ‘Fuck!’ He gazed out of the window, a silly grin on his face. ‘They had to “let me go.”’ He shook his head. ‘Let me fucking go. What a joke. I was just getting into my stride. Another month and I would have been their top salesman.’

Chloe sat beside him and patted his knee. ‘Can I get you anything?’

John Paul frowned. ‘I can’t believe it. Back to fucking square one.’ He leaned back and stared into space. ‘The world has shut the door in my face.’

‘Listen, I’ll get you a beer, mate,’ Greg said.

‘And look at you,’ John Paul said. ‘Everything’s hunky dory. Who would have believed it? And even that Dominic jerk is back on his feet. I mean, what the fuck! Why does all the shit have to happen to me?’ He stood up. ‘Got to get some fresh air. Clear my head. I’m going for a walk.’

‘What a bummer,’ Greg said when John Paul left.

‘He’s taken it really badly,’ Chloe said. Then she pointed quizzically at the TV.

‘What is it?’ Greg asked.

New outside broadcast pictures were appearing. Three police cars and an ambulance were parked outside an old farm outhouse.

‘Police are refusing to confirm the rumours,’ a journalist said, but we’re almost certain they’ve discovered the body of a fourth billionaire. Friends of American billionaire Edward Macey, currently on vacation in London, reported him missing yesterday.’

20

‘Nice view,’ Greg said. There was no doubt that Enterprise Tower offered stunning panoramas of London.

Lucinda ignored him. ‘There are twelve apartments on this floor,’ she said matter of factly. ‘Ten are already occupied, you’re having this one, and the last is about to be allocated to someone else.’

‘Who are the other people who live here?’

‘All the people Jenny and Harry need for their day to day convenience – cleaners, beauticians, personal trainers, butlers and maids, security staff, maintenance guys, general dogsbodies – and me.’

Greg smiled. He couldn’t believe his luck. From a run-down studio apartment in Hoxton to a luxury apartment in Chelsea with a spectacular river view.

‘Don’t get too comfortable,’ Lucinda said. ‘I wouldn’t expect your assignment to last long. Anyway, I’m sure a rich guy like you already has a nice pad.’

‘I have a loft apartment in Islington,’ Greg lied. ‘No river view.’

‘Well, I suppose I ought to show you the floor upstairs,’ Lucinda said. ‘It’s Jenny and Harry’s pride and joy.’

‘You mean their “fun” floor?’

‘They got rid of all the apartments on that floor and created a huge space that they use for...yes, well, fun.’

They went up a flight of stairs to the next floor. Lucinda used a swipecard to open the door, then motioned to Greg to go in. The first thing he was aware of was the huge space, then his eyes settled on a gleaming black glass sphere, held in place by slender steel cables.

‘Would you like to see Happy Valley and Success Tower?’ Lucinda said.

Greg nodded, unsure what he was about to see.

Lucinda pressed a button and the upper half of the sphere shed its black tint, unveiling a stunning architectural model.

‘This is what Jenny and Harry are planning to build,’ Lucinda said. ‘Let me explain the “vision” to you. The whole development is called Happy Valley. It’s a refuge from the ugliness of normal life. It’s where its residents can achieve perfect happiness in a tailor-made paradise. It’s centred on a landscaped valley – walled and gated to keep out the unwelcome. The centrepiece is a lake at the heart of the valley.’ She pointed redundantly at the feature that had immediately leapt out at Greg. A golden tower stood in the centre of the lake, reached by a picturesque covered wooden bridge.

‘The bridge is modelled on the one that spans Lake Lucerne in Switzerland,’ Lucinda said. ‘John Galt loved that bridge. In fact, much of the development is based on beautiful things that Galt, Jenny and Harry have come across on their travels. They wanted to bring all of these special places together in one location.’

‘The tower is awesome,’ Greg said.

Lucinda nodded. ‘It’s inspired by the DNA double helix. It’s unique architecturally. It has room for a thousand residents, spread over fifty floors. Galt got his idea from the “DNA of Success”, the DNA that separates the great from the ordinary. So it’s called Success Tower, and only the hyper successful will be allowed to live there.’

In one corner of the lake was a vast gold book – an elaborate floating stage – with a golden skeleton towering over it, holding open a page. A small, open-air horseshoe amphitheatre was positioned directly in front of it.

‘What’s that?’ Greg asked.

‘Oh, Jenny and Harry once went to the opera at a lake in Austria, and the stage was set up like this. I think the skeleton represents Death, while the book is the Bible or the Book of Immortality or something like that. Anyway, this is where the residents will gather for open air summer concerts and al fresco theatre performances.’

Near the entrance to the covered bridge was a futuristic dome like one of those at the Eden Project in Cornwall.

‘That’s the car park,’ Lucinda explained. ‘It has room for fifteen hundred

cars over three levels. That's where the tower's residents will park their supercars. There's an underground walkway from the dome to the covered bridge if the weather's bad and the residents don't want to walk in the rain.'

Lucinda pointed out various other features. There was a media centre shaped like a metallic sail, where press conferences would be held and journalists and reporters entertained in luxury. There were rolling hills, little copses, Gothic follies, any number of fantastically designed vistas and spectacular panoramic views. A Gothic chapel sat on the crest of a wooded hill, reached via an avenue of flowering cherry blossom trees.

'And where do the workers live?' Greg asked.

'A workers' compound will be hollowed out beneath one of the hills. The accommodation will be highly specified; it just won't be visible. The workers will be on call 24/7. They'll be only a short walk away from Success Tower.'

'You mean they'll be cave dwellers, shut off from the sun?'

'They should go about their duties as invisibly and unobtrusively as possible.' Lucinda smiled. 'Don't worry, they'll have their own supermarket – *Tesco*, I believe – to make them feel at home.'

Greg tried to look blasé, but it was a struggle.

Lucinda pointed out a couple more 'features'. One was a sandstone canyon, recreating the most scenic part of the most beautiful city in the world: Petra, 'a rose-red city half as old as time.' Then there was a small lake with an island at the centre, modelled on Venice's most famous cemetery. Galt wanted the island cemetery to be permanently covered in mist.

Lucinda laughed. 'Oh, Jenny, Harry and Galt might add a further feature. They're thinking of recreating part of Beijing's Forbidden City, and putting some exclusive shopping stores in there. And maybe a small private hospital to cater for any medical emergencies.'

'A self-contained world for the super elite.'

'That's right. It will be a wonder of the world when they finish it. Can you imagine the clamour to be part of it? People will pay anything. Dosh fancies calling it Wonderland, but I think Bling Land is more appropriate.'

'They've started working on it?'

'Yes, but they're only at the landscaping stage.' She glanced at her watch. 'Right, on with the tour.'

She showed him many paintings, installations, sculptures, and expensive gimmicks. There was an old jukebox, a pinball machine, a row of one-armed bandits, state of the art virtual reality games, dodgems, you name it. An entertainment paradise.

'Big kids, eh?' Lucinda said. 'Well, when you have the money...' She led Greg to a room in the corner. 'Now let me show you the adult entertainment.' She ushered Greg into a large hexagonal room full of more paintings, sculptures and installations, this time all with a sexual theme. It was breathtaking. One of the walls had *Sex* written on it in one metre high silver letters.

‘This – surprise, surprise – is the Sex Room,’ Lucinda said. ‘We’ve just hired an up-and-coming artist to fill this section. We love her stuff and think she’s going to be huge.’

Greg couldn’t help frowning. That would have been the perfect commission for Chloe.

When they emerged again, Lucinda was wearing the slyest of smiles.

‘What’s that room in the other corner?’ Greg asked.

‘Oh, you can’t go in there. That’s Harry’s private space. Absolutely no one gets in there, not even Jenny.’

‘So that’s where all the bodies are buried?’ Greg joked.

‘I would advise you not to comment on that room if you want to be here for any length of time.’ Lucinda quickly led Greg away.

‘I notice you always refer to Dosh and Rex as Jenny and Harry,’ he said. ‘Any reason for that?’

‘Those are their names,’ Lucinda replied.

A ding dong signalled that someone had arrived at the front door.

‘Good,’ Lucinda said, ‘right on time.’ She strode over to the door and opened it, with Greg just behind her. ‘Oh, here’s the artist I was telling you about.’

Greg froze.

‘Hi,’ Chloe said.

‘Let me introduce you.’ Lucinda gestured towards Greg. ‘This is Gerard Lambert. He’s a new adviser to Jenny and Harry. And this is Chloe Moston, Jenny and Harry’s new artist, specialising in sexual expression.’

Greg was determined not to let a flicker of recognition cross his face.

‘Chloe’s going to be a star,’ Lucinda said. ‘She has a little studio on Hoxton High Street. I got a rather mysterious invitation, delivered by a courier, to go along there and check it out. I loved it and I recommended it to Jenny and Harry. They went and had a look and they loved it too. They want Chloe to get started straight away.’

Chloe smiled. ‘Dosh and Rex want me to immortalise them sexually.’

‘Excuse me,’ Lucinda said. ‘I just need to pop to the loo. Back in a tick.’

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ Greg asked Chloe as soon as they were alone.

‘I joined the LLN,’ Chloe said. ‘I was praying I’d strike it lucky like you did and, guess what, I have! This is mind blowing.’

‘You’re telling me. I take it the LLN were behind the mysterious invitation.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ve been fully briefed. I know your cover story. Luckily for me, I don’t have to change a single thing about myself. God, this is all so exciting.’

Greg scratched his head. ‘I guess so. What about John Paul?’

‘He’s still moping around. I’m worried about him.’

Lucinda soon came back. ‘I’ll show you to your apartment, Chloe.’ She

turned to Greg. 'You're welcome to keep looking around if you wish. But don't even think about trying to get into the secret room.'

21

Greg had been on his own for a few minutes when the main door opened. 'Oh, hi there, Rex.'

Rex smiled. 'So Lucinda has given you the tour, has she?'

'You have some fabulous stuff here.'

'Jenny and I love this place. We've spent a fortune on it. It's where our dreams become real.'

'Where is Jenny? I'm used to seeing you together.'

Rex frowned. 'She's making enquiries about an odd problem. Might have to get Lucinda involved.'

'Anything I can help with?'

'Jenny and I, and John Galt, own the freehold of this building and we're responsible for maintenance. The residents on the first floor have had a power cut. Only their floor is affected. Our building facilities manager has had three different electricians take a look, but they can't see any faults. It's very mysterious. Anyway, let's not dwell on that. Are you curious about anything here? I'd be happy to answer any questions.'

Despite himself, Greg glanced at the secret room.

Rex shook his head. 'That's not going to happen. But I will tell you why I created that room, if you'd like.'

'You bet.'

'Well, it's the weirdest thing. Two or three years ago, I got talking to a guy and he told me some amazing stuff. All I remember was that he was young and had a rotten job. I wish to God I could get back in touch with him.'

'Why was it such a big deal?'

'That conversation changed my life. The first thing he said to me was, "There are two types of people in the world: those who believe that there are two types of people in the world, and those who don't." I found that really funny. I made him write down the rest of the stuff for me so that I wouldn't forget.' He took a crumpled piece of paper out of his wallet and handed it to Greg.

'We live in the Movie Age,' it said, 'We should make a list of the movies we've loved and hated, the ones that bored us, inspired us, made us laugh or cry, sick or elated. Then we need to compare those movies with our own life. Would anyone else want to watch the movie of our life? Would we want to watch it ourselves? Maybe we'd be the only person in the cinema even though admission was free. Maybe even we would walk out. And if it was that bad, shouldn't we be doing something about it? When Hollywood

movies really stink, the directors want their names removed from the credits. "Alan Smithee" is the name that gets used instead. How many of us are in Alan Smithee movies? If we could avoid using our real name, we would.

'Would we want the headstone over our grave to say, "No point in watching the movie of this person's life. It was a bore, reality TV at its worst. This person didn't do anything interesting with his life, and had no good adventures. He did everything conventionally, just going through the same routines as everyone else. He had a couple of girlfriends, got married to one, had children, bought a house, held down a dreary job, paid off his mortgage, retired...died. Millions of others did exactly the same, a story not worth telling, a life not worth living, a movie not worth seeing.'"

Greg was sure his jaw had been progressively dropping lower as he read. Jesus, was it someone working for the LLN who wrote that stuff for Rex years ago?

Rex ran his hand over his shaved head. 'Radical, huh?'

'It makes you think.' Greg glanced towards the far end of the room. 'Listen, I'll get out of your hair now.'

'Sure,' Rex said. 'Maybe we can hang out down here some time. It's one of the few places where I can relax. Be myself, you know?'

When he got outside, Greg spotted John Paul's black Smart Car parked next to a meter. With blacked-out windows, it looked distinctly sinister. He wondered why John Paul hadn't called to say he was here. Then again, John Paul had been acting oddly lately.

John Paul opened the passenger door and invited Greg in. Greg was astounded to see him grinning. 'What's happened, dude? New job?'

'I've joined the LLN. I'm one of you guys now.'

'What? But I thought...'

'Yeah, I know. I swore over my dead body that I'd never join the LLN. But life is a long and winding road, isn't it?'

'You went through the full initiation?'

'Yup, the whole shebang.'

'So, you...'

'Yeah, yeah, I admitted I was a...' John Paul hesitated. 'It was the hardest thing I've ever done.' He closed his eyes. 'I'm a nobody,' he said, almost in a whisper.

Greg was amazed that he'd finally come round.

'It almost broke me,' John Paul said. 'I thought I was going out of my mind, but I knew I'd never move on unless I faced the music. I had to look in the mirror and see the real me.'

'This is fantastic. All three of us are onboard now.'

John Paul smiled. 'Yeah, when Chloe told me she'd joined, that was a

moment of truth. I didn't want to be left behind.'

'Have they given you any tasks yet?'

John Paul nodded. 'They said they liked me and saw something special in me. They particularly liked the fact that the whole thing was such a struggle for me. They've given me a big task. I hope I'm up to it. I have to give a speech in Hyde Park in front of thousands of LLN activists. They want me to introduce the world to the political wing of the LLN – the Meritocracy Party.'

'The what?'

'Promise you'll come.'

'Of course I will.'

'The Meritocracy Party is mega, Greg. The LLN have got it all worked out. They're going to change the world.'

22

A throng of LLN activists had gathered in Hyde Park, on a cold, crisp Friday morning. Grey clouds hung overhead. A black podium stood in the middle of the park. Police in full riot gear ringed the area.

Greg watched John Paul getting onto the podium and wondered how nervous he must be feeling. As far as he knew, John Paul had never spoken in public before. He was always banging on about what a good salesman he was. Now he was getting the ultimate test of his credentials. He had to sell a speech to a crowd, in front of TV cameras.

John Paul, gripping a piece of paper in his right hand, went to a small lectern, smoothed out the paper and adjusted the angle of the microphone. There was nothing in his body language to suggest any awkwardness.

'I want to tell you about a race you can never win,' he said, his Scottish accent full of gravitas. 'Unless, of course, you're one of "us". The "us" are the privileged elite who make the rest of us dance to their tune. Why do we keep dancing? Isn't it time someone turned off the music, or began a new song?'

He paused, puffed up his chest then launched into the main part of his speech, without glancing at his notes.

'You're the fastest runner in the world,' he said, 'and you take your place at the starting line for the most important race of your life. You look up the track and see some obese guy in a suit standing five metres from the finishing tape. You complain to the race organiser but he tells you to mind your own business and concentrate on your own race. You think it must be some bizarre joke and it will all get sorted out later. The starting pistol sounds and you set off, running faster than you ever have in your life. But no matter how fast you run, no matter how good you are, you'll never beat the fat man, puffing, panting and waddling his way to the finishing line.'

‘Fattie wins the gold medal, and receives the adulation of the crowd. Two blondes throw themselves at him. Everyone tells him how brilliant he is. He says he owes it all to God and his loving family who bought him a place at the best of schools and paid a million dollars to allow him to start five metres from the finishing line. The crowd cheers and demands that the winner’s parents be allowed to stand on the podium alongside their brilliant son. A reporter asks father, mother and son what they think of the second-placed athlete who broke the world record but still lost. They all shrug and say in unison, “Well, he’s not a member of *our* family, so who cares?” The crowd, full of like-minded families, rises to acclaim them. “If only we could all be like them,” they sigh. The world-record holder goes back to his dead end job in a sink estate. His colleagues tell him he’s a loser, and turn their backs on him.

‘Welcome to the anti-meritocratic world, *this* world. What are you going to do about it? Will you stand back and watch while cronyism, nepotism, the old school tie, the private club, the right university, the right accent, the right background, the right secret society, the right religion, the right family, destroy merit so that their chosen ones can prosper at *your* expense. It’s time to smash the conspiracy. Break up all the mechanisms that allow privileged groups to rig the system in their favour and penalise everyone who doesn’t belong to their cliques.

‘The Meritocracy Party, with the LLN as its activist wing, seeks to ensure that everyone starts the race of life from the *same* starting line. Then we’ll see who the fastest runners really are; which ones deserve the medals, who should justly receive the acclaim and the rewards. At the moment, *who you know* – nepotism and cronyism – is vastly more important than *what you know* – merit. How often do we hear the mantra, ‘Networking is the fastest way up the ladder? Meritocracy will push this toxic ladder over. From now on, talent, not your social connections, will be the fastest way to make progress in life.’

The crowd cheered. Greg was amazed by the sheer power of the speech and John Paul’s blazing delivery. It was as though the great talent for salesmanship that John Paul had always claimed to possess, without much visible evidence, was released by the LLN’s confidence in him. Now it erupted...a verbal volcano spewing words of fire. The crowd had quickly grown restless, each word piercing them like a bullet.

‘Do you know why Robert Tressell called his great book *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*?’ John Paul said. ‘It was because they worked themselves to death to make profits for others – their masters who didn’t do a stroke of work but raked in all the money. How many of us here today are similar philanthropists? – going to tedious, soul-destroying jobs so that we can enrich others. Do we have “Sucker” branded on our foreheads? I did for long enough, but not anymore.

‘The people don’t create poverty: greed does, by taking from those with

little to give to those with much. That's the point of capitalism: to enrich a few at the expense of the many, to starve the weak of resources so that they never become strong and threaten their masters. We've been brainwashed into believing that a better life is not for the likes of us. The education we receive isn't designed to liberate our minds, but to make us obedient consumers who know our place in the pecking order. We rely on the judgment of our "betters". Tressell was dead before anyone started listening to him. We ignore our saviours. But not anymore. We'll live life for our own sakes, not to line the pockets of others. The LLN are here to free us.'

Everyone in the crowd was nodding. Roars of defiance erupted everywhere. People in the crowd turned round and postured at the riot police. 'SS Riot Police,' they chanted, pointing directly at the heavily armoured police cordon. 'SS Riot Police, SS Riot Police.' They started giving mocking Nazi salutes. 'SS Riot Police, SS Riot Police.'

The riot police pounded their round shields with their truncheons and bayed like wolves. Sirens sounded and water cannon rolled into view, together with vans of police reinforcements. Blue flashing lights were everywhere, turning the grey sky a strange, pulsing, livid shade.

'We shall overcome,' John Paul yelled over the din. 'We shall not, we shall not be moved...we shall not, we shall not be moved...not by the Queen, Parliament or the Riot Police...we shall not be moved.'

All the LLN activists took up the chant. They injected it with venom, and it soared in every direction: a huge, furious song carried by swooping air currents, swarming into the police ranks, bombarding them with pounding word after pounding word.

A whistle blasted and a megaphoned voice said, 'Move in.'

The riot squad waded into the LLN, battering everyone who didn't run. Elite police snatch squads raced towards all those they had identified as LLN leaders.

Greg ran for it, but still had time to see three policemen storming the podium and seizing John Paul. They smashed him to the ground with truncheons, pushed him onto his front then handcuffed him. They dragged him to his feet and hauled him towards a prison van.

23

The Daily Herald

The Metropolitan Police issued the following statement:

'We are pursuing a number of lines of enquiry regarding the murders of four men in London. The symbols inscribed on their bodies have still not been deciphered. Professor Peter Lafferty of the Department of Linguistics at the

University of Cambridge believes the symbols relate to an unknown ancient language. He is now seeking the involvement of other experts from across the world to decode the symbols. This is a key area of our investigation since the professor has said that knowledge of this language would likely be restricted to no more than a handful of people on earth. Apprehending the perpetrator or perpetrators of these killings is our top priority. We have allocated an unprecedented number of detectives to this case, more than to any other case in history. We could not be doing any more.

‘Regarding the policing operation of the LLN demonstration at Hyde Park, this was not heavy handed. Police officers were attacked, and they responded as per their standing operating procedures. The fact that one hundred protestors were hospitalised demonstrates the disgraceful level of violence against which the officers had to defend themselves. They would have suffered extensive injuries if they had not taken been equipped with full riot gear.

‘Several LLN ringleaders were arrested. John Paul Harker from Hoxton, thirty years of age and unemployed, was the main agitator. He is currently being questioned.’

24

Greg pulled up his collar. Christ, he hoped no one recognised him. This wasn’t a clever move. Instead of staying well clear of John Paul after his high profile arrest, here he was, hanging around outside Paddington Green Police Station. John Paul had called him on his mobile to say he was about to be released and could do with seeing a familiar face.

While Greg was lurking behind a tree across the road from the police station, he saw another familiar face.

‘What are you doing here?’ Dominic asked. ‘You mustn’t be seen with Harker.’

‘I know, but he’s shaken up and wanted a friend to help him wind down. Why are you here?’

‘The LLN sent me to pick up Harker. He’s due out any minute, I’ve been told. I think they have someone inside tipping them off. The same guy has told the media that Harker’s coming out the back way, so with any luck we won’t have to worry about those clowns.’

‘You seem a bit uptight, Dominic.’

‘I can see the way the wind’s blowing. They’re going to make Harker the public leader of the LLN. That should be my job after everything I’ve done.’

‘That can’t be right. I mean, John Paul’s only just joined. No, I’m sure it will be you.’

Dominic shook his head. ‘Well, if you think you’re on top of things here, I might as well shoot off. I’ll let the LLN know that Harker asked for you

personally so that no flak comes my way.'

It was only a minute after Dominic left that John Paul appeared at the entrance of the police station. Greg beckoned him over and the two friends hurried to the first decent pub they could find that was sufficiently far from the police station. Greg bought a pint of cider for John Paul and a Guinness for himself. He had just taken his first sip when John Paul erupted.

'They'll be putting us in concentration camps next. These people are capable of anything. They're exactly the same as the SS. I despise the police. They're class traitors, oppressing ordinary men and women.' He scarcely drew breath before singing the praises of the Meritocracy Party and the LLN. 'I tell you, Greg, this movement will change the country forever. The Meritocracy Party will bring smart and just politics to this country for the first time. And the LLN's activists will be the ones who bring them to power. We'll engage the enemy by land, sea and air.'

Greg was astonished by the transformation in his friend. After resisting the LLN for so long, John Paul now seemed their most zealous advocate. He had that glint in his eye of the fanatical convert to a cause – much more extreme than those who had believed all along.

Greg nodded while John Paul ranted and raged, and only gradually noticed that four men in the far corner were staring intently at them. Dressed in black, they were big, burly and shaven headed. 'I think we're in trouble,' he whispered to John Paul.

Greg spat out blood. Fuck, had he lost a tooth? He tried to see where John Paul was. Shit, they were propping him up against a wall and slamming their fists into his stomach. In his mind, he replayed the events of the last few minutes. He had asked the barman for the phone number of a local taxi firm, and then he'd arranged for a cab to come round and collect them. The taxi had simply driven round the block and stopped at the head of an alleyway where the four thugs were waiting. They dragged them out of the car and threw them against a wall. The barman must have set up the whole thing.

It was an expert beating. Although he'd been badly roughed up, Greg knew it wasn't serious enough to need hospitalisation, and he suspected it was the same with John Paul. It was a calculated warning. Maybe the thugs were off-duty policemen who'd followed them from the police station. Another thought occurred to Greg. Was Dominic behind this? – some crazy revenge for John Paul stealing his place in the LLN's pecking order?

One of the thugs took out a camera and started snapping pictures.

'Right, cunts,' their leader said. 'You got off lightly today. Next time you won't. John Galt wanted us to give you a message. Tell your LLN friends that if they mess with the big boys, they're in for a nasty surprise. You guys can never win. You're way out of your league.'

They sauntered off, laughing. Their black bomber jackets all had the same motif on the back – a pair of outstretched eagle’s wings. Above the wings were the words *No Fear*, and beneath *Search and Destroy*. They got into the cab and it drove off, tooting its horn.

Tossers, Greg thought.

John Paul was slumped on the ground, moaning. Greg crawled towards him to see how he was. One thought kept going through his mind: what if Galt saw the pictures the thug took?

25

‘Jesus, what happened to you?’ Dosh and Rex were shocked. Even Lucinda managed to conjure an expression of sympathy. Greg had bumped into them in Enterprise Tower’s luxury elevator. They were returning from filming a documentary entitled *Paradise Found* about their gilded lives.

‘I was attacked,’ Greg said.

‘Who did it?’ Dosh asked. ‘The LLN? They’re out of control. They should all be arrested.’

‘Have you reported it to the police?’ Rex asked.

Greg nodded. ‘I gave them a statement and descriptions of the four attackers. They didn’t take it seriously.’

‘I think you have to be killed these days before the police get off their arses,’ Dosh said.

‘We’re just going to get changed,’ Rex said. ‘Then we’re off out again. John Galt is treating us to a “unique happening.” Why don’t you get cleaned up and come with us? It will cheer you up. We’re inviting Chloe as well to welcome her to the team.’

‘OK,’ Greg said. One way or another it would be an eventful night. He’d either find out if Galt had seen the incriminating pictures, or experience a unique happening, whatever that might be.

‘Oh, make sure you wear warm clothes,’ Rex said.

‘Why?’

Rex smiled. ‘You’ll see.’

Galt collected them in a chauffeur-driven gold limousine with gold-tinted windows. He immediately enquired about Greg’s cuts and bruises and Greg supplied the same explanation as before, relieved that Galt obviously hadn’t seen the incriminating pictures.

It was seven o’clock on a dark, chilly evening. A short drive took them to a park next to the river. Galt owned it, and was planning, he said, to build a

riverside mansion there.

When Greg stepped out of the limo, he was tempted to rub his eyes. In front of him was an illuminated, open-topped steel cage with a clear glass floor. A glass table, with matching glass chairs, stood in the centre of the cage, and it was laid for a feast. The structure was attached by steel cables to the hook of a massive crane.

‘Welcome to my deluxe dining craft,’ Galt said. ‘Don’t worry too much about the cold: we have heaters onboard.’

Greg had noticed Galt giving Chloe lecherous glances when the two were first introduced, and also noticed that Lucinda wasn’t best pleased. Galt, unmarried, was a notorious ladies’ man and liked having trophy girlfriends on his arm.

When they took their seats, it was surprisingly warm. The heat was coming from unobtrusive heating columns under the table. Greg was positioned between Dosh and Rex, and directly opposite Galt who was flanked by Chloe and Lucinda. They all had to wear special harnesses.

When all the preparations were completed, Galt raised his right hand. ‘We’re going up to eat with the gods,’ he announced pompously. A moment later the crane started lifting the cage into the air – to an eventual height of about fifty metres. The crane gently swung them out over the Thames so that they had the river directly beneath them.

‘Cool,’ Chloe yelled over the noise of the wind. Greg thought ‘terrifying’ was more accurate.

‘Welcome to your sky meal,’ Galt said. ‘What better stage than this for an unforgettable meal? Everything should be an occasion, every moment special, don’t you think.’ He took a large pearl from his pocket and suspended it over a glass of red wine. ‘Did you know that Cleopatra, in order to impress Mark Antony, dissolved a priceless pearl in her cup of wine, drank it and said it was the finest she’d ever tasted? Maybe we all have to sacrifice the things we value to get what we want.’ He smiled then put the pearl back in his pocket.

Greg had no idea what Galt was talking about.

‘Today, fellow gastronomists,’ Galt said, ‘we shall partake in a Futurist Banquet. Our menu for tonight is based on the 1932 *Futurist Cookbook* by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. I can guarantee you an unforgettable culinary experience.’

Greg was intrigued by Galt’s mention of the Futurists. Thanks to the LLN’s briefing document, he was already familiar with them: a radical art movement from the start of the twentieth century.

‘Marinetti was a man after my own heart,’ Galt said. ‘He wanted to break with tradition, to mock the rabble stuck in the past. He believed in the future. That means he believed in us.’ He smiled and gave a signal. The waitresses distributed menus.

Greg looked at his and shook his head. *Bizarre*.

The Menu

Taste Buds Take Off: A soup of meat, champagne and grappa, sprinkled with rose petals.

Italian Breasts in the Sunshine: Two half spheres of almond blancmange, with a strawberry placed at the summit of each, and sprinkled with black pepper.

Chicken Fiat: Roasted chicken stuffed with ball bearings. Garnished with whipped cream.

Beautiful Nude Food Portrait: A crystal bowl of fresh milk containing the meat of two boiled cockerels, overlaid with violet petals.

Equator + North Pole: Poached egg yolks around a cone of whipped egg whites, dotted with orange segments and black truffle shaped as a tiny airplane.

The Excited Pig: Salami cooked in espresso, with a touch of eau-de-cologne to add extra flavour.

Candied Atmospheric Electricities: Coloured bars of frozen soup, hollowed out and filled with tutti frutti ice cream.

Diabolical Roses: Red roses, battered and deep-fried.

Simultaneous Ice Cream: Raw onions placed in vanilla dairy cream, with both ingredients then being frozen to make a delicious ice cream. Covered by pitted cherries soaked in brandy and dipped in chocolate.

Galt laughed. ‘No, I wouldn’t dare to inflict a Futurist meal on you. It’s disgusting. What we’re actually having is haute cuisine prepared for us earlier by Logan Reeves.’ He said that while they were eating, he wanted everyone to reveal what their favourite movie was.

Greg was fascinated by how many people raised that question. It seemed particularly meaningful, as if it somehow gave an insight into people’s secret selves.

Rex began and said *The Godfather* was his. ‘I wanted to be in the Mafia after watching it. Isn’t that amazing?’

Chloe repeated her usual mantra that *The Millionaires’ Death Club* was her favourite. ‘I think Zara, the superbitch, is awesome. It was such a stylish movie, completely different from run-of-the-mill chick flicks.’

Dosh selected Walt Disney’s *Cinderella*. ‘I identify with it,’ she said. ‘I came from a poor background and I found my own Prince Charming – Harry Prince! – and I’ve bought the most expensive shoes in the world, just like Cinderella’s pair of glass slippers. I’ve had the full rags to riches story. I came from a single parent family with nothing, and look at me now.’

Greg trotted out his usual choice – *The Matrix* – because it was one of the most intelligent movies he’d ever seen, with fantastic special effects.

Lucinda said that being a traditional girl she would choose either *Pride and Prejudice* or *Jane Eyre*. ‘Every girl needs her tall, dark stranger, doesn’t she? – her Mr Darcy or Mr Rochester. Why is it impossible to find guys like that these days?’ She shot a contemptuous look at Greg.

‘I shall choose a Russian movie,’ Galt said. ‘*Stalker* by Tarkovsky is about a forbidden zone that holds an incredible secret. The normal laws of physics are suspended there. People are smuggled into it by a man called a stalker and he leads them on a journey to the centre of the zone where they may find the answer to their deepest desires. One day soon I’m going there. In the next few weeks all of my dreams will come true.’

‘Really?’ Chloe asked.

‘Just wait and see.’ Galt winked.

Greg wondered what he could be referring to. If the LLN had their way, it would be Galt’s worst nightmare that would be coming true.

At the end of the meal, when they were enjoying a selection of desserts, a song started playing from concealed speakers: David Bowie’s *The Man Who Sold the World*.

‘I love the idea that one man can sell the whole world,’ Galt said. ‘Of course, to sell it you have to own it. That’s my dream.’ He didn’t seem to be joking.

An illuminated light aircraft appeared in the darkness over their heads and swooped down towards them. Galt smiled. ‘I thought a fitting climax for our aerial banquet would be a skywriting event.’

‘What’s the message going to be?’ Lucinda yelled into the wind.

‘You’ll soon find out.’ Then he relented. ‘No, the message will be: *For ours is the kingdom, the power and the glory*. It’s true, isn’t it? Without us, there’s just the benighted masses and perpetual darkness.’

The craft used luminous green smoke to write its sky message.

‘That’s odd,’ Chloe said as more and more of the message was revealed, ‘those aren’t the right words.’

Galt peered hard. The message was much longer than he’d said it would be. The opening words were beginning to lose their shape as the final ones were completed, but the whole of central London could see the message: *For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his soul – LLN*.

‘Bastards!’ Galt slammed his fists against the glass table.

26

Greg was strolling along the riverbank, his head still full of the crazy events of last night’s sky meal. Things had come to a halt soon after the

LLN's stunt. Galt was livid. That just made it funnier, of course. Galt said it was 'gloves off time.' Greg couldn't help thinking Galt's thugs would be out in force. He heard a toot of a horn and turned round.

'Get in,' John Paul said, rolling down the window of his Smart Car.

Greg looked around then opened the door and climbed in. 'How are you, John Paul? You don't look so good.'

'I'm healing just fine. Those bastards won't grind me down.'

'So, what's the story?'

'I have big news. The LLN need a public face, and they've chosen mine.'

'You're the leader of the LLN?'

'As far as the world is concerned, yes, but I'm really just the guy whose face appears on the posters.'

'Jesus, I thought they'd pick Dominic.'

'They decided he was too high risk.'

'I bet he wasn't happy.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

Greg gazed ahead. He was intrigued that Dominic had tuned in so fast to the LLN's preference for John Paul. 'Do you know who the LLN's real leader is?'

'No, and I've never met anyone who does.'

'Why have they chosen you? I mean, you've only just joined, and you resisted for so long.'

'That's the whole point. I didn't want to join. I had nowhere left to turn. Admitting I was a nobody was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do to. The LLN realised I was the perfect person to communicate with all the people who aren't yet ready for the LLN. There was no point in choosing someone who had signed up without a fight. Someone like that would never be able to reach out to the non-LLN folk. I can because I'm like them. The LLN gave me one big test – that speech in Hyde Park. After that, they knew I was the right man to lead the movement.'

'So you know what they're planning?'

'Much of it, yes. What you've seen so far is just the start. The main plan is breathtaking. I mean astounding. It's hard to believe they could ever pull it off, but they're so smart anything's possible.'

'Can you give me any hints?'

'I'll tell you about the less secret parts of the plan. We're going to have a *Great Refusal* day – a chosen date when we refuse en masse to cooperate. Another special day is *Bartleby Day*.'

'Who's Bartleby?'

'He was the antihero of a short story by Herman Melville, the guy who wrote *Moby-Dick*. Bartleby worked in a lawyer's office in Wall Street, drawing up legal documents. One day his boss asked him to proofread a document and Bartleby answered, "I would prefer not to." His boss was taken aback but didn't take any action against him. Bartleby refused more

and more tasks until eventually he wasn't doing any work at all. His boss, a gentle man, couldn't bring himself to sack Bartleby and tried to understand him better. But when he asked Bartleby to answer personal questions, Bartleby gave the same reply: "I would prefer not to."

'One morning it was discovered that Bartleby was secretly living in the office after being evicted from his lodgings. His boss felt sorry for him but knew things couldn't go on like this. Rather than get rid of Bartleby, he chose to move office instead. But the people who moved into his old office soon came to him for help because Bartleby was still there and refusing to move, or, rather, greeting every request to leave with his usual response of, "I would prefer not to." They eventually managed to throw him out, but he just hung around the hallways like a ghost. His old boss tried to reason with him, but got nowhere. In fact his old boss became so disturbed by the whole situation that he took time off work. When he returned, he learned that Bartleby had been imprisoned. He bribed a guard to make sure Bartleby was well treated and had plenty to eat and drink, but a few days later he discovered that Bartleby was dead. The guard explained that whenever he was asked if he wanted to eat or drink, Bartleby said, "I would prefer not to."

'The old boss found out that Bartleby used to work in a Dead Letter Office: the end of the line where undeliverable mail ends up. The letters were undelivered because the address was incomplete, or didn't exist anymore, or the people who lived there had moved on and not left a forwarding address.

'The Dead Letter Office is an incredible place. It's the symbol of when we lose contact with people we were once close to. It's where our best intentions to communicate come to grief. Our failure to stay in touch takes an almost physical shape. The experience of that place had gradually overwhelmed Bartleby. He couldn't communicate anymore, just like the letters he processed every day.'

'Jesus, some story.'

'We're all in that Dead Letter Office. For us – the nobodies – the whole planet is a Dead Letter Office. No one's listening to us. Our words vanish in the wind. Money talks and we, without any, are silent.'

'But isn't Bartleby pathetic? He doesn't seem like much of a hero.'

'Bartleby is the ultimate rebel. The truth is we'd all "prefer not to", but, unlike us, Bartleby had the guts to go through with it, right to the bitter end. If you can't do the things that make you the best person you can be, you shouldn't do anything at all. That's how I interpret Bartleby's message. Imagine an entire nation saying, "We would prefer not to." Nothing could be more powerful. It's the supreme act of defiance. That's what we're all going to do on *Bartleby Day*.'

'Is there anything else you can tell me about the LLN's plans?'

'Sorry. All I can say is that their plan, if it works, will change the world.'

'Are people going to die?'

'No, the enemies of the LLN will simply be rendered irrelevant.'

Greg squeezed a stress ball. He was sitting in his apartment in Enterprise Tower, thinking over what John Paul had said. Did the LLN really believe they could pull off all that stuff they were planning? On one level, it sounded visionary, but on another it was nonsense. They could never get enough people to join in. OK, they had quite a few activists already, but the plans they were contemplating needed millions.

There was a light rap on his door. Greg glanced at his watch: 11.55 pm. When he opened the door, Chloe bustled past him and plumped herself onto a spare seat.

‘Wow, who would ever have thunk it?’ she said. ‘Here we both are in Enterprise Tower.’

Greg closed the door and sat down opposite Chloe. She was looking typically stylish in a red T-shirt, white jeans and olive army cap. ‘It’s been mad, hasn’t it?’ she said. ‘This is our first proper chance to chat. God, my head’s spinning. I couldn’t believe what happened to you and John Paul. Then that weird meal last night...what the fuck was that all about? Galt’s a nut, isn’t he? Quite charming in his own way, though.’

Greg threw his stress ball at her. ‘You’re in the LLN now. You can’t fancy the enemy. It’s against the rules.’ It was typical, wasn’t it? The girl he’d admired for so long was already enamoured of the world’s most monstrous man. Even worse, Galt had shown obvious interest in her.

Chloe smiled sweetly and started tossing the stress ball up and down. ‘Incredible about John Paul, eh?’ she said. ‘One minute he’s vowing never to join the LLN and the next he’s the leader. It’s a funny old world.’

‘He’s already turning into a fanatic, you know.’

‘I know what you mean. When he called to tell me his news, he started preaching. But at least he’s happy now.’ She stood up. ‘I think I’ve found my calling too. I’ve been working non-stop since I got here. I’m made up.’

‘What task did the LLN give you?’ Greg asked.

‘Nothing specific. Just to be here, watching Dosh and Rex, how they react to things, and who comes to see them. Just building up a picture of their behaviour really. I hear they’ve managed to smuggle lots of us into the homes of celebrities and the super rich. They’re going to decide later how to make best use of us.’

‘It’s all very mysterious, isn’t it?’

‘Most of the LLNers I’ve met are convinced it’s a reality TV thing and we’re all being secretly filmed. We were told it definitely wasn’t, but a lot of us are still suspicious.’

Greg nodded. ‘I still couldn’t swear it’s not. The thing I don’t get is how well funded and organised the LLN are.’

‘Best not to worry about it. Want to go upstairs and see the work I’ve

done so far?’

Greg looked at his watch again. ‘It’s late, and I’m a bit tired. I’m still recovering from that beating.’

‘Come on, spoil sport. I’ve sweated blood over this.’

Greg shrugged. ‘OK.’

As they made their way to the Sex Room, Chloe kept talking about Dosh. ‘She says her daily task is to earn at least ten thousand pounds before she gets out of bed in the morning. It’s unbelievable. She has a list of media contacts on her Blackberry. She just goes through them one by one, having a chat and seeing if anything’s on offer. You name it and she’ll talk about it for the right price.’ Chloe clapped her hands. ‘She claims there’s an infinite number of ways of making the easiest money imaginable, just so long as you’re famous. If you’re not, you could die in front of someone, and they’d step over you and continue on their way.’

‘It’s amazing, isn’t it?’ Greg said. ‘Ten years ago when no one had heard of Dosh, no one would have given her the time of day. Now every clock is set to Dosh Time. She’s making millions a year just by chatting about herself. Some job, huh?’

‘Yeah, that’s a job, all right.’

‘I thought Lucinda was her agent. Why does Dosh do this stuff herself?’

‘She loves it. It gives her a high, especially when she clinches a big deal.’

‘So Lucinda doesn’t do much?’

‘She’s just there for window dressing as far as I can see. A nice, ex-public schoolgirl with a posh accent. I think Dosh gets off on having someone like that working for her.’

‘Dosh is quite a character, isn’t she?’

‘You’re telling me. Did you know she has a pet rat that she dresses in a gold jacket? And the hair extensions she uses are made from real hair sold by Hungarian girls. Dosh doesn’t see anything wrong with that – she says she’s helping the Eastern European economy. Shameless, or what?’

‘The mansion she has in LA has a permanently flowering rose walkway leading to a summerhouse in the middle of a designer lake. I heard she was interested in feng-shui and all that stuff. Dosh as a gardener, huh? I just can’t see it, but there you go. Apparently, she wants to enter some American National Garden competition. I bet it would be a celebration of the cheesiest, blingest flowers imaginable. She probably thinks she could literally make money grow on trees.’ Chloe started giggling. ‘Lucinda says that Dosh has a Money Room in her LA mansion. It’s a celebration of wealth and Cinderella sentimentality. It contains big gold dishes containing money and jewels. She has a bed in there with a golden duvet cover covered by dollar signs, with matching pillows. She has huge cuddly toys – polar bears and pandas and jowly dogs and when she’s feeling down she goes and sleeps in there.’

Chloe opened the door to the Sex Room and stepped inside, but hesitated before switching on the light. 'Hmmm, what do you think of the electricity problem?' she said in the darkness. 'It's getting worse. Another floor has been affected.'

'Didn't I hear Galt saying he was on top of that?' Greg said.

'He's brought in top experts, but none of them can find any problems. It's a total mystery. A virus in the computer controls is the top theory. Galt's having to temporarily relocate the affected people to one of his new developments. He's not happy.'

'Which floor went dark this time?' Greg asked.

'The sixth.'

'Bloody hell that means that apart from reception, the whole of the bottom of the tower is blacked out. The problem is creeping up the tower floor by floor.'

'Like something from a Japanese horror movie, huh?'

Chloe finally switched on the lights. Greg breathed in hard when he saw the interior of the Sex Room. Chloe had already made a massive difference. She had plastered pages from hardcore porn magazines over the walls. Scattered over the floor were several infamous sex books: *Justine* and *The 120 Days of Sodom* by the Marquis de Sade, the *Story of O* by Pauline Réage, *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Torture Garden* by Octave Mirbeau, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* by Catherine Millet, and *The Sheik* by Edith Maude Hull.

'What do you think of my sculpture?' Chloe asked.

Greg had been trying not to look at it, but now he had no choice. He couldn't quite believe what he was looking at – a cast of Rex's erect manhood – depressingly large – in solid gold, including his golden balls, one of his buttocks in silver, and his six-packed torso in polished bronze. As for Dosh, she had a solid gold vagina, a shapely silver bum, and those famous enhanced breasts of hers, in bronze. Greg shook his head. His and hers matching sets of erogenous zones: so Dosh and Rex. Then, suspended from the ceiling from steel cables, was a sculpture of the golden couple fucking, in Chloe's trademark style, complete with optical fibre cables producing all the colours of the rainbow.

'They totally love it,' Chloe said. 'They want a whole bunch of them. *The Flying Fuck Squadron* they want to call it.' She seemed thrilled as she gazed at her own work.

'It's good,' Greg said. 'You're exactly where you want to be, aren't you?'

'Joining the LLN was the best thing that ever happened to me. I just can't believe how well things have gone. Every dream is coming true.' She led Greg over to an array of circular mirrors: one in the middle and eight symmetrically placed around it, like an exotic flower. 'What do you think of these? Fab, aren't they?'

They had a shimmering, iridescent look. They were coloured purple, Greg thought initially, but as he moved backwards and forwards in front of them, they kept changing colour to red and orange, yellow and green, blue and indigo.

‘They’re called diachronic mirrors,’ Chloe said. ‘They’re a spin-off of the space industry, apparently. I love the way they change colour. I’m going to get some jewellery made out of diachronic glass. It’s soooo beautiful.’

‘They give you all the best materials to work with, don’t they?’

Chloe nodded. ‘It’s perfect. Absolutely everything is perfect.’

Greg gazed at her. She was in her element, practically glowing. But he realised something else. She was enjoying it far too much.

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One of Dosh and Rex’s stranger habits, as Greg had discovered, was that they loved to watch the news each night, if they were at home. They said they wanted to know what was going on in the world. Their routine was to sit together, holding hands, in the front row of their private cinema, watching the news on an enormous LCD screen.

‘We don’t have any education,’ Dosh said, ‘but we’re much richer than 99.9 percent of the people who have qualifications coming out of their ears. So who are the real dumb asses?’

Greg didn’t argue. He sat back and sipped from the cocktail he’d been given – a Black Martini. He’d never seen anything quite like it: a black drink with gold flakes floating on the surface.

Lucinda and Chloe were there too, and also enjoying Black Martinis.

The news began with presenter Mark Reynolds in the studio. ‘Is this a revolution?’ he asked, staring self-importantly into the camera. ‘We are devoting the first half of the programme to this mysterious organisation that has come from nowhere and captured the support of so many radicals. Their many claims frequently sound preposterous, but their numbers are growing every day. Their publicity stunts started off amusingly, but are assuming an increasingly sinister complexion. Where’s it going to end? Our reporter Zenab Raisee followed the man who calls himself the leader of the LLN. He’s John Paul Harker, a man fired from his job as a mobile phone salesman just last week. What lies behind his meteoric rise?’

The TV picture cut away to images taken out and about in London that day. The young Asian reporter did her best to explain what it all meant.

‘Well, Mark,’ she began, ‘today I’ve been on a history tour. The LLN decided to treat Londoners and tourists to a number of historical reconstructions. For example, they took over the area around the Tower of London and performed a reconstruction of the trial and execution of King Charles I. They had actors playing the parts of Charles, Cromwell, the Chief

Judge and the Commissioners who signed the King's death warrant. I'm told they delivered verbatim the words spoken at the original trial. They chopped off the head of a dummy and held it up in front of the crowd saying, "Behold the head of a traitor!"

'They then changed costumes and did the same for the trial of Louis XVI, with many actors going through all the speeches in the debate about whether the king should be executed. The speeches of Robespierre and Saint-Just were, I must say, spellbinding. I think the LLN are using professional actors.

'They also reconstructed the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family by the Soviets. They set up a mock cellar and pushed the Imperial Family in front of a Bolshevik firing squad. And they showed the assassination of Julius Caesar and the execution of Mussolini.'

'What message do you think they're trying to get across, Zenab?' Reynolds asked.

Zenab, now standing in the evening dark outside London's City Hall, smiled sweetly. 'I don't think that's hard to guess. That we're living in revolutionary days, and the powers that be had better watch out.'

'And how is Buckingham Palace reacting to all of this?'

'Well, Mark, security has been increased at the Palace, but they have offered no comment on the LLN. Let's just look at a few other LLN activities today. I should emphasise that these are just a selection. They're occurring all over the capital and further afield too. Their leader doesn't make any attempt to conceal his agenda, as you'll see.'

Greg winced when John Paul appeared on the screen.

'Not a single person I admire is rich,' John Paul said to a cheering crowd of activists. 'Make greed illegal is what I say. The day we live in a just world is the day the world's richest person is no wealthier than, say, twenty times the world's poorest person. That allows scope for rewarding skill and hard work, but not for feeding greed.'

Greg was amazed by how charismatic John Paul had become in front of a crowd. He seemed electrified, and he certainly electrified his audience. Greg caught Chloe's eye then quickly turned away when he noticed Lucinda peering at them. Dosh and Rex were scowling as they silently sipped their Black Martinis.

On screen, John Paul raised his hand and made it into a clenched fist. 'The greedy, the super rich, the celebrities – they're all deadheads. You know what those are? – people who get in everywhere for free. That's celebrities, isn't it? That's the Queen, isn't it? She's never carried money in her life. She even brags about it. *Parasite*. You know that when John Galt drops a fifty-pound note, it's not worth his time picking it up. Each second, he earns more than that in interest on his billions in the bank. He doesn't have to move a muscle to make millions. How ridiculous is that? These people are the ultimate freeloaders. They're life's passengers, getting a free ride at everyone

else's expense. And the irony is that they're the richest bastards on earth. What a joke – the people who have all the money don't pay a penny. Kick them out onto the street, I say.

'Deadhead also means an unproductive person. Isn't that a definition of a celebrity, or a member of the royal family, or a greedy person earning interest without doing any work? I mean what do these people do? What do they contribute? They don't even pay tax. Their smart accountants bury it in offshore accounts. Tax is for little people, right? Suckers like us.

'Deadhead also means a dullard, and Christ these people aren't half dull when you get up close and personal with them. Scriptwriters give actors their good lines. Without one, well, they have nothing to say. I mean, have you ever heard Dosh and Rex rabbiting on? If you want to hear what a vacuum sounds like, there's your chance.'

'Who is that awful man?' Dosh squealed.

Rex patted her knee.

'The fight back starts soon,' Lucinda said. 'I'm just finalising a few ideas.'

'They'd better be good,' Dosh said.

Greg wondered what had happened to Dominic. He hadn't seen him for a while. At one point, he seemed to be running the LLN, or at least be one of their main operators. Now John Paul was undeniably the face of the LLN. More pictures of him came on screen. He was standing on an old pirate ship moored close to the Tower of London.

'Celebrities, we beg you to save us from global warming,' he yelled. 'Cure cancer for us. End poverty. Unify Quantum Mechanics and Relativity Theory. Sorry, what's that you're saying? – oh, you're just entertainers and you can't do anything? Yeah, that's right, you fucking deadheads. How come the dancing clowns got to the top of the food chain? Even you must know you're a joke. Shall I tell you which celebrities I hate most? – chat show hosts, the pied pipers of morons. And then the sit com brigade, the fake laughter track gang. The joke's been on us for all these years. But not anymore. There's a bad moon rising for all you luvvies. The shit storm is coming.'

John Paul's LLN activists made a show of hanging effigies of various famous chat show hosts from the ship's yardarm. They made men in suits, wearing masks of prominent members of the super rich, walk the plank, to ecstatic cheers as they toppled into the Thames, before being rescued by a rowing boat. They carried out a 'Defenestration of Canary Wharf Tower' where they threw stuntmen dressed as rich City toffs out of a high window onto a crash pad. They built a bonfire outside Canary Wharf Tower and burned effigies of Ayn Rand – the patron saint of right-wing businessmen. They fed the fire with scores of copies of Rand's book *Atlas Shrugged*. Then they played *California Über Alles* by *The Dead Kennedys*.

Six LLN airships floated over Central London with the words *Salvation is coming* highlighted in neon on their sides. LLN activists waved placards saying, 'Do not collaborate with the enemy. Nobodies should shun somebodies at all times.'

When the picture returned to the Channel 4 studio, Mark Reynolds seemed on the verge of openly sniggering. 'It's quite a show, Zenab, isn't it? Is it meant to be taken seriously? Is it surrealism?'

'Mark, I've heard that behind the scenes, a lot of intimidation is taking place. Apparently many editors of national newspapers and magazines, many directors of big companies, many celebrities, are being followed wherever they go by members of the LLN. When any activists are arrested, new ones replace them. The police can't cope with the number of arrests they're making. There's no room in police cells, and there's now a huge backlog of court hearings. The judicial system is in chaos. Many members of the LLN are openly carrying black flags showing the white skull and crossbones.'

'They think they're pirates, Zenab?'

'Perhaps, Mark. I suppose it demonstrates that they believe they're outside the law, that they're going to take from the rich and give to the poor.'

'And it isn't just Britain that's gripped,' Reynolds said. 'The LLN's stunts are the main news in many countries. News and documentary teams have arrived from every corner of the globe to chronicle this revolution/social transformation/mass hysteria – whatever label applies.'

'LLN groups are springing up in other European countries, most particularly France, Holland, Germany, Spain and Italy. But America, the main source of the wealth and celebrity toxins that have poisoned humanity, according to the LLN, is where the LLN are making the most rapid progress outside of Britain. Even Hollywood has begun to see pro-LLN agitation. Many of the people who worked behind the scenes in movies are saying, off camera admittedly, that they are sick of the prima donna actors and the media moguls who squeezed them for every cent to grab more of the pie for themselves.'

Dosh switched off the TV. 'We have to do something fast.' She turned to Greg. 'What can you give us?'

'I'm afraid my advice hasn't changed. I think the LLN are winning and I think if you want to salvage anything you have to make a gesture to show you've changed your ways. Give a huge chunk of cash to the poor, or take an enormous self-imposed pay cut...anything to change the perception that you're greedy. The LLN are portraying all rich people as masked highwaymen holding up the people at gunpoint and extorting money from them, and it's working. You need a radical makeover.'

Dosh and Rex shook their heads. 'That's not going to fly, Greg.' Dosh grabbed her mobile phone. 'I'll call John Galt. He's certain to have a plan.'

John Galt's riverside mansion was only a kilometre from Enterprise Tower. The more Greg found out, the more he realised Galt owned practically the entire riverside of this affluent part of London. He had been invited by Dosh, Rex and Lucinda to attend a 'war council' with Galt.

They arrived in Dosh's favourite gold Bentley, were admitted by two security guards through the high iron fence, and parked next to a red Ferrari Millechili supercar in the luxury garage. They were greeted by Galt who led them along the pebbled pathway adjacent to his Georgian mansion's beautiful lawn, edged by jet-black roses. He explained that they were synthetic. 'They fool everyone other than horticulturalists,' he said with a smile. 'They even give off a realistic scent.'

Although his mansion retained many period features, it also had modern elements that didn't jar with the existing architecture. Most prominent was an external glass elevator leading to a roof terrace, with a floor made of reinforced glass. There were French doors and elegant windows fitted with shutters. Galt said the mansion had its own swimming pool, gymnasium, cinema, sauna, games room, and 'war room'. That was where they were heading for their meeting.

The room contained hundreds of well-thumbed books on military strategy. A matching bookcase on the opposite side of the room contained no books – just row after row of Faberge eggs. The centrepiece of the room was a huge table supporting a scale model of the Battle of Austerlitz, Napoleon's greatest victory. There were tens of thousands of miniature soldiers in detailed uniforms. Cavalry units and artillery batteries joined vast formations of infantry. The terrain of the battlefield included realistic hills, frozen lakes and tiny villages.

'This battle was a tactical masterpiece,' Galt said to his guests. 'Napoleon deliberately weakened his right flank to encourage the enemy to attack there. He was relying on the rearguard of his army marching seventy miles in two days to arrive in time to shore it up when the serious fighting began. He assumed the enemy would withdraw troops from their centre to reinforce the attack on his right, allowing him to smash through the weakened centre and capture the hill that dominated the battlefield. From there, the enemy would be at his mercy. "One sharp blow and the war is over," he said as he ordered the decisive attack.

'I admire him so much. I love the way he deceived the enemy. That's the key to everything. One sharp blow is what I'm looking for as far as the LLN are concerned, but it's not going to be easy. From what I can see, they have a diffuse structure. I hear their leader is just for show; he's not the man behind the curtain pulling the strings. No one seems to know who that is.'

‘What would you do if you knew who the real leader was?’ Lucinda asked.

‘Decapitation,’ Galt said. ‘A headless organisation is a powerless organisation.’

‘When you say “decapitation”, you don’t mean...’

Galt brought out several photographs and handed them to Lucinda. ‘Pass them around.’

Lucinda peered at them. ‘That’s the LLN’s leader. Did you beat him up?’

Greg felt his stomach turning. Christ, were these the pictures the thug took? Was Galt about to expose him?

Lucinda didn’t say anything, just passed on the pictures. Greg flicked through them. They all showed John Paul, but there were none of him. What was going on? Had he just got lucky? Galt was staring at him. *Shit*.

Dosh and Rex took the photos. ‘We can’t be associated with any violence,’ Rex said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Galt replied. ‘I’ll take care of anything that needs doing.’

‘I have a plan for how to change the public’s perception of Jenny,’ Lucinda said. ‘I think she should have two personas. One will be ordinary Jenny: naturally pretty, very little makeup, down to earth, emphasising the tough background she came from. She’ll be someone the people can identify with. She might even go back to her natural hair colour for that role. The other will be Dosh: a rich, gorgeous, impossibly glamorous blonde goddess that every girl wants to be. We need to create doublethink – the ability to see Dosh as completely ordinary and fabulously extraordinary at the same time. We want the punters to simultaneously identify with her and worship her.’

‘A bit like Jesus Christ?’ Galt half smiled. ‘That was his game, wasn’t it? – to be like us and yet not like us: man and God. I’m always amazed so many people fell for that one. Anyway, sounds like a winning strategy to me. Well done, Lucinda.’

‘I like it,’ Rex said.

Dosh shrugged. ‘I suppose it’s OK, but I’m not looking forward to going back to my roots, hair or otherwise. I spent my whole life escaping them.’

‘Don’t worry, you’ll have fun,’ Lucinda said. ‘When you’re in your Dosh persona, I want you to be more glamorous than ever, the Queen of Bling. I want you to drive faster and flashier cars. Let cameras into your own home, be photographed at the loveliest locations, the most fashionable events, the best parties. I want you to live a more vivid dream than ever before, to provide the illusion of perfect success. And I also want you to double the amount of charity events you go to. Go to hospitals. Be seen with sick children and old grannies, newborn babies and famine victims, poor people and landmine victims. All that sort of stuff. Do good deeds. Show how you’re making a difference, show you care. Be one of the people. Make them believe you’re their Queen of hearts.’

‘Will that work?’ Dosh asked Greg.

‘You already know my opinion. The tide has turned. The LLN are unstoppable.’

‘Why do you keep saying that shit?’ Galt snapped. ‘It’s our manifest destiny to rule the world. We are the Chosen People. And those who oppose us are damned forever. Anyway, the LLN are just a minor irritant. They can’t sustain this campaign. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner is making arrangements with the Home Secretary to use emergency powers for dealing with civil disorder. He’ll be able to arrest these LLN activists for practically anything: for breathing the air and drinking water if necessary.’

‘That will backfire,’ Greg said. ‘Anything you do will create an equal and opposite reaction. If you beat up the LLN’s leaders, you’ll make them heroes. If you lock them up, they’ll be martyrs. If you crack down on them, you’ll legitimise their grievances. You’re just feeding the dialectic that’s going to undo your whole system.’

‘Fuck dialectics.’

‘Well, how would you play it, Future Man?’ Lucinda asked.

‘You have to take the heat out of it. Make concessions. Defuse the unexploded bomb.’

‘Let it detonate,’ Galt said. ‘The bigger the bang the better. This is a perfect chance to consolidate our position. We’ll drive through new measures that will make us more secure than ever.’

Dosh nodded. ‘You can’t give these people any concessions. They’ll just keep wanting more, like *Oliver Twist*.’

Greg smiled. ‘You see, both sides are intransigent. If no compromise is reached then one side loses everything, like Louis XVI or Tsar Nicholas II. That’s the way the dialectic works.’

‘We’re going round in circles,’ Galt said. ‘Just sit back and watch us winning.’ He winked at Lucinda. ‘Here’s the only formula worth knowing: good connections plus hard work plus entrepreneurial instincts equals vast wealth. Why should I spread that wealth? If I had my way, I wouldn’t give a single penny to other people. Fuck the taxman, fuck the welfare state, fuck everyone other than me and mine.’

‘You’re not exactly out to make friends, are you?’ Greg said. ‘What if the government decided to take away your money and spread it out equally to give everyone a fair chance?’

‘If that happened, it wouldn’t be long until the same people who were rich before were rich again. We know how money works. We designed it. It feels natural in our hands, but the poor will always be strangers to it. They’ll piss it away. That’s what they’re like. It would simply flow straight back to us.’

‘That would be true if the government didn’t change the system. But the old rules wouldn’t apply anymore.’

‘Nonsense,’ Galt snorted. ‘None of the dumb arses are smart enough to change the system. Anyway, it all comes down to *panem et circenses*.’

‘What?’ Rex said.

‘Bread and circuses. The Romans knew how to deal with the masses. Feed them and entertain them. That’s it.’

‘The LLN are different,’ Greg said.

‘Don’t make me laugh. They’re just a fad that will soon vanish. The march of nobodies, the power of nothing.’ Galt clapped his hands. ‘Anyway, onto other matters. I’ve got experts from Harvard University flying over to sort out the electricity problem over at Enterprise Tower. They’ll soon get to the bottom of it.’

‘Maybe the LLN are sabotaging you,’ Greg said.

No one responded. It was though he had never spoken.

‘Oh,’ Galt said after a long pause, ‘I’m thinking of adding to my chain of Central London restaurants. I’ve got my eye on *Alberigo*. It’s the best of the new restaurants in London. Other investors are sniffing around.’

‘We had a bad experience there,’ Dosh said. ‘A dumb waiter ruined our evening. They’ve offered us a free lunch this week to make up for it. Why don’t you join us?’

Galt smiled. ‘Certainly.’

Greg kept quiet. He didn’t want to let on that he’d been at the restaurant that night too. Luckily, Lucinda hadn’t recognised him. He quickly changed the subject. ‘Aren’t you worried about the billionaire murders, Mr Galt?’

‘Not in the slightest,’ Galt said. ‘No one would dare lay a finger on me.’

30

Greg hadn’t wanted to go back to Dominic’s ex-restaurant, but Dosh and Rex had invited him and he thought it would look odd if he said no. They always seemed to want him around, like some sort of lucky charm, though he didn’t think he was helping them at all. He was increasingly conflicted about his role.

Lucinda was invited too, but said she had to be elsewhere, and Chloe said she wanted to get on with her work. She was busy creating ‘sexual automatons’ with oversized phalluses.

They got out of Galt’s stretch limo and went into the restaurant, past a few stray paparazzi. The manager greeted them at the entrance, practically bowing to them. He snapped his fingers. ‘Their coats,’ he said to the nearest member of staff, but nothing happened. Greg looked at the three members of staff standing behind the manager. They were all gazing at the floor. Galt squinted at the manager.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’ the manager said, turning sharply. ‘Their coats.’

The three members of staff folded their arms and turned their backs.

Jesus. Greg wondered if he would have had the guts to do that.

The manager grabbed one of them. ‘I gave you an order.’

‘We’re not doing anything for *them*,’ the employee said.

‘Is there a problem here?’ Galt said. Dosh and Rex swapped a glance.

The manager turned round. ‘I...er...there seems to be...’

A young guy stepped out from the cloakroom, holding a camcorder.

‘You heard us. We’re not going to do anything for these people. No one will be taking their coats, or showing them to their seats, or pouring their drinks, or waiting on them, or talking to them, or making food for them.’

The manager struggled to speak. The veins were sticking out on the side of his neck.

‘Have you gone mad?’ Dosh blurted. ‘You must know who we are.’

The guy pointed his camcorder at her. ‘You, your husband and Galt have been Cained.’

‘We’ve been what?’ Galt blurted.

‘The LLN have declared that you have the mark of Cain upon you. Everyone who works in this restaurant – apart from the manager – will refuse to help you in any way.’

Galt grabbed the manager. ‘Are you going to let this clown talk to me like this? I want him sacked.’

‘OK,’ the manager said turning to the LLN man, ‘you’ve left me with no choice...you’re dismissed for gross misconduct.’

‘No problem,’ the guy said. ‘I’m out of here.’

‘And the rest,’ Galt said. ‘I want everyone who refuses to serve us dismissed on the spot.’

‘And you wonder why you’ve been Cained?’ the newly fired guy said.

‘Get out of here,’ Galt said. ‘And if you use any of those pathetic pictures, I’ll sue you for invasion of privacy. We’re on private property and I have my rights.’

‘Oh, I’m so scared.’ The guy sauntered past Galt, giving him an impertinent stare.

‘But what if everyone refuses?’ the manager said to Galt.

‘Then sack them all.’

‘But I’ll have to close the restaurant.’

‘If your staff aren’t willing to work, you don’t have a business, do you?’

‘I suppose, uh...’

‘Suppose what?’ Galt snorted. ‘You’re thinking of asking us to leave, aren’t you? Well, if you did that, I’d buy the restaurant and fire you, so you’d better run along and do what you’re told.’

The manager went away sheepishly and approached each member of his staff. One by one they walked out, blanking Galt, Dosh and Rex as they went. Some of them glanced at Greg. He tried not to react, but he felt like patting each of them on the back. Unbelievable solidarity. Maybe for the first time, he truly appreciated being a member of the LLN.

The manager returned a few minutes later, his face crumpled. ‘They’ve all gone,’ he said, ‘every one of them.’

‘What’s happening to the world?’ Dosh said.

‘Just a freak incident,’ Galt said. ‘When they have to queue up at the job centre, those people will soon start playing a different tune.’

‘This is much more serious than you think,’ Greg said. ‘Imagine what things would be like if every restaurant were like this. You wouldn’t get served anywhere.’

‘It’s just an old-fashioned boycott. If it comes to it, I’ll buy every restaurant in London and fill them with my own staff.’

‘I have to close now,’ the manager said.

Galt turned and walked out, followed by the others. Greg watched the manager putting up the Closed sign. The paparazzi were snapping away crazily, their earliest Christmas present ever.

Outside the restaurant, the sacked staff had gathered into a gauntlet that Galt and the others had to walk through. The LLN guy filmed the whole thing, and the paparazzi were also making sure that no one would forget.

‘I warned you,’ Galt barked at the LLN guy.

‘Warn all you like. Your writ doesn’t run in this town any longer. You’re discovering the LLN’s greatest truth – money is an illusion. You can be worth a trillion pounds, but if no one’s willing to sell you anything, or cooperate with you, you might as well be penniless.’

The guy turned the camera on himself. ‘I am authorised by the LLN to announce the *Great Refusal*. We call on every worker in the country to refuse to serve rich people and celebrities on 21 February. The Great Refusal will prove once and for all that all the money and fame in the world won’t help you if there’s no one you can buy with your cash, no one you can impress with your fame. We’re taking back what’s ours – our dignity.

‘As for John Galt, people like that will have to learn the hard way. Wealth, in a world of dignity, counts for nothing. How will you sail your yachts without a crew, keep your luxury homes tidy without cleaners, have luxury food without people to prepare it for you? Where will you go if no one drives or flies you? What will you do when no one serves you in a bar? What will you do in luxury stores when you can’t buy anything because no one will accept your money? Money is a fantasy currency, and we’re destroying the fantasy. Your billions are worthless now. Just colourful paper. You might as well throw it on a pyre and set it alight.’

Greg saw the shock in Galt’s face. Dosh and Rex’s too. The penny was finally dropping. This wasn’t a protest; it really was a revolution.

‘Oh, Galt, we’re putting this film on YouTube,’ the LLN guy said. ‘Sue all you like. There’s one of you and millions of us. You’ll never stop us. People like you got lucky, that’s all. And now your luck’s run out.’

‘Well,’ Galt said, ‘tell this to your idiot supporters: As Oscar Wilde once said, “All success is down to luck, just ask any failure.”’

‘When we’re done with you, you’ll be one of the failures. Then we’ll be happy to ask you for your opinions on luck and success.’

Greg was standing in the centre of the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern. He'd arrived a few minutes early for a meeting with John Paul and was gazing at the single installation that dominated the huge space. Called *Life*, it consisted of buckets of sand on hooks going round and round on a circular mechanised rail about two metres above the ground. When each bucket completed a full circle, it emptied its contents into a hopper, then refilled from the same hopper and started on its journey again.

At 2 pm, John Paul appeared.

'So, what do you want?' Greg asked.

'It's LLN business. I don't have time to fuck around. Now let's get on with it.'

Greg was shocked by John Paul's aggression. Every time he saw his friend he seemed angrier and crazier.

'How do you think the campaign's going?' John Paul asked.

'Pretty well. Things have started changing. You've certainly put the wind up Dosh and Rex. Galt is all bravado, but I think he's feeling it too.'

John Paul shook his head. 'No, it's not going well enough. It's all surface. The people are intrigued by the LLN but not yet committed to the cause. It's just an amusing game at the moment, a distraction from the normal celebrity worship. It wouldn't take much for them to go back to the bad old days.'

'I don't know about that.'

'Tell me more about Dosh and Rex.'

'I'm meeting them this afternoon. Dosh is doing a book signing in a store at Piccadilly Circus.'

'You mean a signing for a book she didn't write but which has her picture on the front cover? So, why do they want you around so much?'

Greg shrugged. 'I guess I'm not like the usual freeloaders they meet. People are always wanting things from them, but I never ask for anything.'

'I hope you're not getting friendly with them. That would be dumb.'

'I could never like people who believe the world revolves around them.'

'Well, with the amount of media attention they get, they're probably justified in thinking that. Anyway, I want you to keep a close eye on them. We want to know if they're starting to crack.'

'Like I say, they're not happy. They're terrified the LLN will destroy their way of life.'

'Let's hope they're right. The day cunts like that are finished is the day we know we've won. From what you're telling us, they're clueless about how to respond to the LLN. That's the way we want to keep it. Make sure you emphasise the negative. Take all their hope away. Make this whole thing seem inevitable.'

‘But you’ve implied you’re not confident. Why the doubts? It’s still early days. The LLN has plenty of momentum.’

‘The leadership of the LLN, the real leaders, are the most brilliant thinkers on earth. They’ve spoken to me over the phone. They’ve told me what the dangers are. They know exactly what they’re up against: tens of thousands of years of disastrous human evolution. It takes a huge effort to stop an oil tanker or make any meaningful change in its course. Changing evolution is infinitely worse. That’s the biggest tanker of all, one that’s been going in the wrong direction for millions of years. How can you change the human dross that evolution has produced? The survival of the unfittest, that’s what we’re really contending with. Human beings are defective. That’s why we live in this shit world, controlled by six thousand psychopaths.’

‘Six thousand psychopaths?’

‘Come on, you must have heard about the secret society of six thousand people who are in charge of everything that counts. They’re called the *Organisation*. They run the system we’re trying to overthrow. We’re just six thousand people away from freedom. Six thousand fucking people. Can you believe it? Galt is one of them, and Dosh and Rex too.’

Greg glanced at the sand buckets going round and round. ‘Yes, Galt has mentioned six thousand people before. It doesn’t seem many, does it?’

‘Not many at all. There’s one of them for every million of us. And yet they’re winning. It’s astounding. They’ve somehow managed to make us buy into a fantasy that they’re worth a million of us, or even worse that we’re all zeros and even if you put us all together we’re still equal to zero. It’s complete bullshit. We could destroy them at any second if we got our act together.’

‘But things could be a lot worse, couldn’t they?’

‘Really? I think this is pretty close to as bad as it gets. Galt thinks he can get away with sending thugs to beat us up. What next – will he try to kill us? That maniac is capable of anything.’

‘What are the LLN planning to do about it?’

‘They’re going to use evolution’s deadliest weapon to reverse evolution.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Evolution gave birth to faith. It was a successful adaptation that allowed those who had it to flourish. Our world is shaped by faith. History is the record of the progression of faith. Only faith can undo faith. Faith in something new, something better.’

‘I’m not following.’

‘Our mission is to create a new faith. It’s not sufficient for the people to like the LLN, they must believe in it. Buy into it totally.’

‘Come off it. That’s going way too far.’

‘I’ll tell you how far we’re going. The LLN has made an astonishing discovery, one that goes right to the heart of religious belief.’

‘Discovered what?’

‘Haven’t you been watching the news? Those archaeological digs in Iran – that’s the LLN’s work.’

‘You’re not serious.’

‘You bet I am.’

‘How can archaeology change anything?’

‘Don’t you get it? We’re starting again, cleansing the earth. We’ll go back to *Day Zero*, the origin. Tell me this, where did it all begin, as far as the believers are concerned?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never been particularly religious.’

‘Of course you know. Everyone knows. The discovery will be announced on the news shortly.’

When John Paul said what the discovery was, Greg spluttered. ‘You have to be joking.’

‘No joke.’

‘But there’s no such place. It’s just a Bible story.’

‘Not anymore. It’s really out there.’

32

Greg watched as a swarm of teenage girls and boys excitedly jostled around in front of the table where Dosh was doing her book signing. Above her, a banner said, ‘*Henley’s*, the people’s favourite book store, welcomes Dosh for the signing of her fabulous new best-seller: *My Dream Pony*.’

Rex was as busy as Dosh. While she signed books for the girls, he signed football strips and autograph books for the boys. No one paid the slightest bit of attention to Greg. He scanned around – where were all the adults? His gaze drifted past the kids, to what was going on outside in Piccadilly Circus. A crowd had gathered. He wondered if the LLN were up to something, but he didn’t get that vibe. He went outside to find out what was happening.

The crowd were all staring at the large screen overlooking Piccadilly Circus. A ticker tape message ran along the bottom saying, ‘British archaeologists astound the world.’ There was no sound, just the face of an excited news presenter. It didn’t seem to matter that the crowd couldn’t hear what she was saying. They just stared, some of them almost open mouthed, their eyes wide.

Greg pushed his way into an electronics shop where a throng had gathered in front of a bank of TV sets. This time, there was no problem with sound. The TV pictures switched from the studio to a young female presenter with tousled hair, standing in front of a bizarrely shaped rock structure that resembled a tree, with a trunk and branches.

‘For two weeks a group of British archaeologists have been promising an earth shattering revelation,’ she said. ‘Today, at a news conference just an

hour ago, they have delivered beyond our wildest dreams. The astonishing news is that they claim to have discovered the Garden of Eden. And it's right here in the Adji Valley in northwest Iran, ten miles from the regional capital of Tabriz. As a matter of interest, the old name for Adji Valley is "Meidan", which means "walled garden".

'Their excavations have focused on the extraordinary tree-shaped rock formation you can see behind me. And if the camera pans around, you will notice that this strange rock is set in a lush valley, and there's evidence that the whole area was once walled in. Four rivers meet in the vicinity of this valley, exactly as described in the Biblical account of Eden. The base of the massive rock is dotted with interlinked caves and evidence has been found that an ancient community lived in these caves. The archaeologists say that they have found an ancient book, which they are claiming is the oldest ever – humanity's very first book. So the community that lived here must have been wise and learned.

'There are altars in the caves, and even an underground chamber that may have been some sort of dungeon. In other words, this complex seems to have been a university, temple and prison all at once. The speculation is that this strange rock is none other than the fabled Tree of Knowledge.'

She stared into the camera with an odd expression, as if she could scarcely believe what she was saying. 'After all, it's a rock shaped like a tree, and was once full of wise men. The archaeologists have speculated that it has been transformed by mythology into Eden's famous tree. Believe it or not, but wall paintings were found inside the caves depicting serpents, and the serpent may well have been sacred to the people who lived here. Is it possible that the Bible story of Adam and Eve is a story about a group of nomadic people with primitive religious beliefs arriving in this heavenly valley and encountering a community of sages who worshipped serpents? Moreover, the valley is full of ordinary trees that you can see all around me. They are apple trees. Was it from an ancestor of one of the trees around the rock that Eve plucked the apple of disobedience, and tempted Adam?

'The full name of Eden's most famous tree was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The archaeologists' most astounding discovery is a unique artefact that they found buried in a pit in a cave inscribed with paintings of apples. The archaeologists are being tight lipped, but I'm told the artefact is shaped like a serpent and contains images of light on one side, and darkness on the other: good and evil. The rumour reaching us is that it may be some sort of device. No further details are available at this time, but a separate press conference has been arranged for tomorrow at which it has been promised that the world will be permitted to see this incredible device. This is Jenny Lomas reporting for BBC news on the day when the Bible came to life.'

Greg was amazed by the complete silence that greeted the news. Everyone seemed locked in their own thoughts. He went back to Henley's.

The store was deserted now. Dosh was sitting behind her table looking as though she were about to burst into tears. Rex seemed bewildered. 'Where did everyone go?' he asked. 'One moment everything was going great, the next everyone vanished.'

Greg didn't answer. He just stared at the golden couple. For the very first time, he thought the day of celebrities really might be coming to an end. But was it going to be replaced by the rebirth of religion?

33

The next few days were some of the strangest in Greg's life. Religious mania gripped not just Britain but the whole world. The serpent artefact and the book the archaeological team discovered were endlessly debated. At their press conference, the archaeologists described the book as revealing the language of Adam and Eve. The language resembled hieroglyphics and the oldest texts of ancient Egypt were being consulted to help with unravelling Eden's unique book. The same universities were also asked to take it in turn to study the serpent artefact.

Within a matter of days, the panel of experts were proudly presenting their translation of the book. It contained similar material to the beginning of the Old Testament, they said – which was the key to translating it so quickly – although it seemed more symbolic and mystical. The book said that the Eden community believed that the serpent artefact controlled the amount of good and evil in the world. Originally, so the community thought, the artefact was set to eliminate evil, and Eden was intended to be a paradise of perfect goodness. Later, a renegade priest stole the artefact and changed the settings to allow evil to reign in the world. He sabotaged the device so that it couldn't be restored to its original settings. This priest was later referred to as the Adversary...Satan. The world had been in evil's thrall ever since.

People's imaginations were gripped. Some openly wondered if the artefact could be repaired with modern technology and the world returned to paradise. Greg struggled to take the story seriously, but the academics involved all had impeccable credentials. The world seemed desperate to believe them. They loved this story. It had taken over their dreams.

Dosh and Rex were ignored for the first time since they entered the public limelight. Their pictures didn't appear in any newspapers or magazines. There were no stories about them, no gossip.

Lucinda arranged various publicity stunts, but everything backfired. Her campaign of presenting Dosh as down to earth and, at the same time, impossibly glamorous got nowhere. The more she attached signs of success and desirability to Dosh and Rex, the less successful and desirable they became. The LLN jeered and mocked them wherever they appeared. Lucinda

did her best to defend Dosh and Rex, but whenever she spoke in public, protestors held up placards behind her saying, 'I bullshit therefore I am.'

At a charity fashion do featuring Dosh, Rex and several supermodels, the LLN issued a statement saying: 'Charities are a branch of the celebrity industry. The causes that get all the funding are the ones that attract the attention of celebrities. If you don't get celebrity endorsement, you don't get money. Why should celebrities be allowed to decide what are fit causes for charity? Charity is a vehicle for celebrities and the rich to pretend they care about others. If they actually did, they'd be working as unpaid volunteers in famine-stricken Africa. The whole thing is hypocrisy raised to the level of obscenity; the greedy's most cynical trick to mask their avarice. It's time to pull off the masks. Ban all charities. If something's worth funding, the state should pay. If it's not worth funding, who cares? We've reached the stage of charity porn on TV. Rich fuckers walk amongst the poor like gods then, at the end of the programme, we get the money shot where the secret millionaire writes a cheque and tearfully hands it to one of the fawning underclass. The super rich are saints now, it seems. Has there ever been a worse religion?

'As for philanthropy, it isn't about helping people – it's a fashion statement, an ego trip for the rich who want the power of God over others. Philanthropy is now part of capitalism. Some even refer to it as "venture philanthropy", like venture capitalism. It's just another business opportunity. How is it possible for the rich to get richer on the back of charity? Yet that's what happens.'

Dosh and Rex denounced the statement, but there was no doubt the LLN were poisoning the couple's image. It was the same story for every celebrity. Many spoke longingly of the days when they were pursued relentlessly by the paparazzi, the good old days so to speak when people still wanted to know about them. Not anymore. Celebrity was becoming uncool, even toxic. And the rich weren't immune either. Anonymous financiers with unanonymous pay packets were being chased and taunted as relentlessly as the celebrities.

Dosh and Rex became depressed. Every day, a stream of people popped in to see them: counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists. They were all there to address Dosh and Rex's recurring nightmare: life as nobodies. By the end of the week, they'd cancelled every appointment and were refusing to venture out. They were beleaguered, isolated, imploding like Hitler in his bunker.

Greg stayed in with them and they seemed to appreciate the gesture. They didn't resent him even though he had predicted this would happen. He liked that about them. Really, they should have kicked him out. He wasn't exactly much use to them. But they were still reassured by his presence. Anyway, they needed all the 'friends' they could get. As for Chloe, she kept working on her art installations. She hardly noticed anything else. Greg

admired the way she was so single-minded.

Lucinda was around most of the time too, usually licking her wounds. She hated the way she was being treated by the LLN. It made her short tempered. One day she came up to Greg and started chiding him over his lack of activity. 'Look at the way Dosh makes deals. Every day she makes money.'

Greg looked at her in disbelief. 'Not anymore.'

'This is just temporary. Anyway, the point is that she makes the most of herself, of the opportunities that come her way. But look at you. Always moping around. Here you are living with the most famous couple in the world. Opportunities are there in droves, but you're not taking them. You could be making pots of money, sleeping with beautiful women, becoming a celebrity in your own right as an adviser to the stars. Yet you're doing nothing. What's wrong with you?'

Greg didn't reply.

'I hate the LLN,' Lucinda said, 'but at least they have balls. Look at their leader. People admire him. Even Galt does. Having said that, I think he's about to take him down.'

'What?'

'Galt is going to show the LLN once and for all who's boss.'

34

The call came at 7 am. Greg assumed it was John Paul. He had called him the previous night to let him know what Lucinda had said, but John Paul had laughed it off. Maybe he was taking it more seriously now.

The call was actually from Galt, who seemed in a particularly good mood. He explained that John Paul had been arrested in a dawn raid and would be making an appearance in front of a Tribunal of Enquiry under the Government's Emergency Powers Act. The Tribunal would look into the LLN's ongoing acts of public disorder and nuisance. Galt wondered if Greg wanted to come along and watch the proceedings. Greg hesitated, fearing he might be placed in an awkward position, but eventually agreed. He hoped John Paul could withstand Galt's legal manoeuvres. The LLN's position all along was that they were engaged in legitimate protest and had never actively provoked trouble.

The courtroom was in Chelsea's Magistrates' Court. An old, creepy judge called Sir Montague Barrington was in charge of the three man Tribunal of Enquiry. The courtroom was packed with journalists, reporters, curious

members of the public, and policemen. Members of the LLN were prevented from entering.

Greg sat close to Galt, feeling irritated by how unpleasantly triumphal Galt was.

John Paul was brought into the dock and the proceedings began. Sir Montague read through a long list of incidents involving the LLN, and complaints that had been received from the public, particularly from celebrities and the super rich. He concluded by saying, 'Is it not true, Mr Harker, that you have recently said that the LLN's purpose is to commit something that you refer to as "hypercide". Is that not an explicitly murderous threat?'

'What? – to kill *hypers*?' John Paul said, prompting sniggers from the public gallery. 'Hypercide is an abstract idea. It's about killing off the hyper aspects of our society, the things that are pulling society apart. It's about bringing to an end the ability of some people to achieve hyper wealth, hyper status, hyper power...the people who are propped up by hyperbole and hyper deference. We are here to kill off celebrity culture and the tyranny of the super rich. We act in the name of the people. Don't be in any doubt, hypercide is coming. We're going to kill everything overdone, exaggerated, overpraised, overpaid, the world of hysteria, the magnified, the hyper.'

Greg enjoyed that answer, and the way it made Galt scowl. The proceedings continued in much the same way, with the members of the Tribunal asking various incriminating questions, and John Paul batting them expertly to the side, to Galt's increasing fury.

At the end, John Paul demanded to make concluding remarks, and Sir Montague reluctantly agreed.

John Paul stood in the dock, looking straight at Galt. 'You've engineered this, Galt. It's a put-up job, a stitch up. You are the man behind the curtain. You control the law with your money.'

Sir Montague furiously banged his gavel.

'Our nation is enslaved by the cult of the object – capitalism,' John Paul went on. 'The more objects you possess, and the more expensive they are, the happier you will be, so the capitalists say. But "things" never made anyone happy. You always want more and newer things. As soon as you possess them, they lose their sheen. You're forever chasing your own tail, pursuing an illusion that always tempts but is never grasped. Tantalus is the god of capitalism. You think the objects possess power and you must own them to increase your own power. But in the end they own you. We want to kill retail therapy, and everything that lines Galt's pockets and gives him power over us. Stop shopping. You're a slave to objects and then you die. Free yourselves. Live.'

Galt scowled, and the journalists scribbled furiously in their notebooks. Again, Sir Montague banged his gavel. 'That's enough, Mr Harker. This isn't a speaking platform for you.'

‘I’m entitled to speak,’ John Paul said, and again stared at Galt. ‘We have something the somebodies can never have – weight of numbers. We can beat anyone and change anything if we stick together. The mission of the somebodies is to ensure we never act as one. They do everything to divide and rule. Now the time has come to put aside our differences. We’ll take what’s ours and no one will stop us. This is our time, this is our world, and we will run things according to our agenda. Galt’s day is done. The old world is dead. Nil by mouth. Do Not Resuscitate.’

Galt stood up. ‘This is outrageous. Over my dead body will a bunch of nobodies rule this nation. We are the only people standing against the tidal wave of barbarians. All of the highest values of humankind reside in us. The LLN are scum. These people are preaching revolution. They plan to turn the world into Pol Pot’s Cambodia, to set the clock to Year Zero. They want to create the Communist Republic of Hell, with beauty, talent and greatness exterminated. If the law isn’t prepared to stop them, I know those who will.’

With that, he strode out of the hall. Greg got up and followed him.

‘If you attack us, we’ll swap you bullet for bullet,’ John Paul yelled after him. ‘You shoot one of ours, we’ll shoot one of yours. We are in the valley of Elah. This is David versus Goliath and we are not afraid anymore.’

‘That’s enough,’ Sir Montague shouted. ‘This is blatant contempt of court.’

‘Your world is crumbling,’ John Paul shouted at Galt’s back. ‘We are the people and we shall not be moved. *Vox populi, vox Dei* – the voice of the people is the voice of God.’

Greg caught up with Galt as he left the court. The two men walked into a throng of LLN protestors dressed as judges in black robes and grey wigs, with black caps on top of their heads – the traditional item worn by judges when they pronounced the death sentence.

‘Death, death, death...’ The protestors began a slow chant.

Galt shook his head. ‘Has the world gone mad?’

35

Galt and Greg got into Galt’s chauffeur-driven silver Rolls Royce and the car drove off. Galt turned on a digital radio, and within minutes news came on that John Paul had been freed, to the joy of his supporters.

Greg didn’t know what to make of what was happening and decided it was wise to keep quiet. The streets of Chelsea were flooding with protestors dressed in black, some waving black anarchist flags, and others the skull and crossbones. Galt’s Rolls Royce struggled to make progress. The protestors thumped on the sides and yelled obscenities.

It soon became obvious from news reports that Paul’s release had acted as a trigger for a citywide eruption of LLN activity. An excited presenter of a

radio phone-in show said that advertising screens all over London had been hijacked and were now showing scenes from Hollywood movies. The one in Piccadilly Circus featured incendiary speeches by Peter Finch from his Oscar-winning performance in the movie *Network*. 'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore,' Finch bellowed manically.

Other screens showed the climactic shootout in *The Wild Bunch*, the violent shoot-up in *The Matrix*, the helicopter gunships strafing the Vietnamese village in *Apocalypse Now*, the graveyard gunfight in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the bullet-riddled mayhem on the beaches at the start of *Saving Private Ryan*, Hal going insane in *2001*, the simultaneous execution of enemies while a baby was being christened in *The Godfather*.

When the phone-in presenter started taking calls, he was inundated with callers. Galt held his head as one ranting voice after another celebrated the LLN, with precious few condemning them.

Listen to me, it's all a delusion, mate. They tell you that you have to own property and they sell off all the state housing. They make you get a huge mortgage. Then you have to spend the best part of your life paying it off. So, job security becomes critical. You have to be a compliant little dog and go along with all the shit they throw at you. You see, they've locked you into their system. It's genius. It's all about credit, which is actually just debt. They don't care what we do as long as we consume. They use debt to control our lives. They pull all the strings. Until now. Thank God for the LLN. Maybe we'll get our lives back.

We live in the society of the capitalist spectacle, mate, the more spectacular the better. Build it and they will come, as that old baseball movie says. We worship the event, the occasion, the unmissable show. We want Super Sunday, the Thriller in Manila, the showdown of the century...the things that bring the highest profits for the capitalist organisers. If you're not at the event, you're nobody. Life has passed you by. That's the tyranny of the spectacle. Yet, if you think about it, the spectacle is the biggest joke of all – because all the people at the event are desperate not to be losers. Who wants to be in a collection of people fleeing from fear of failure? Losers and the spectacle go together, the winners performing and the losers watching. The spectacle is how losers numb the pain, how they crave to be part of something, on the winning side for once. The LLN have decided to harness the society of the spectacle too, but not the capitalist version where small groups perform to large groups and get paid a fortune. Instead, the LLN offer the spectacle of life. And Revolution is the greatest spectacle of all.

We're all extras in others' movies. Why not be the stars?

I don't know what it is. I just want to be part of it. It's an event, right?

Loads of film clips are appearing on *YouTube*. I've heard about defections from the army and the police. Everyone's joining the LLN. *Facebook*, *MySpace* and *Bebo* are going into meltdown. All social networking sites simultaneously got a flash message to come and join the anti-rich protests.

I got a message on *Facebook* saying it was a dance rebellion. They want a London-wide rave with glow sticks tonight. We're going to dance our way to freedom.

There's flash mobbing going on everywhere. People are walking really fast in shopping malls. Someone gave me a flyer saying, 'Movement = Freedom. The faster you move the freer you are.' Another said, 'Loud music, walking fast, no cars, no mortgages, bold colours, drugs, alcohol, movies – this way lies deliverance. Start getting the ingredients together, brothers and sisters!'

Right, one of the greatest movies of all time is Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. It's great for just one reason. It shows people at the back of a crowd listening to Jesus Christ. They can't hear properly, and they frequently misinterpret what he's saying. If that were an Alpha movie – a movie that revolves around unrealistic heroes – you'd see the camera right in front of Jesus' handsome face and you'd hear his perfect delivery of his flawless speech, but the Pythons gave us an Omega movie, a movie for nobodies, so the camera is right at the back, miles from the action, where most of us are positioned in real life. That's what we want...for the cameras to be moved away from the gods and positioned where the real people are.

Get a load of this...they're burning cannabis in the streets. They're talking about seeding the clouds with LSD. The police are running around everywhere like blue-arsed flies. It's so funny.

I heard they were playing *Warning* by The Levellers over and over again in Trafalgar Square. The New Model Army's *Vengeance* is blasting out from Canary Wharf. A choir is singing *The Fields of Athenry* outside St Paul's Cathedral. Scottish pipers are playing *The Flowers of the Forest* in front of the Bank of England. The Dropkick Murphys' *Johnny I Hardly Knew You* is blasting out from the BT Tower, and the Stone Roses' *I Wanna Be Adored* is shaking the Stock Exchange to its foundations. *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* is being pumped out from a riverboat going up and down the Thames. I heard that *Two Tribes* by Frankie Goes to Hollywood is being played outside the Houses of Parliament, and the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK* outside Scotland Yard. They're sabotaging muzak in supermarkets and playing Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, Holst's *Mars, Bringer of War*, and

Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The funniest thing of all is that LLN activists are outside the gates of Eton College playing The Jam's *Eton Rifles*. It's musical mayhem.

They've set up soup kitchens to keep everyone well fed. They're distributing bread rolls and bottles of water. Hey, man, they're feeding the five thousand, just like Jesus fucking Christ.

I heard they overran Glyndebourne, and posh people in frocks and dinner jackets had to flee in panic. That must have been a funny sight – all those posh cunts having to move their arses for once.

We admire the Paris Commune of 1871. We are the new Communards. And we're also setting up Durruti Columns – you know, like the famous unit of anarchist fighters during the Spanish Civil War.

They're calling it the Danse Macabre. People dressed as cadavers pull you out of the crowd to dance with you. Death is democratic, they say, so why isn't life?

We wave the black anarchist flag because we won't obey the law of the powers that be. We wave the skull and crossbones to represent our mortality, the futility of wealth and fame, and to show we'll take what's ours without the permission of our oppressors. We're gonna burn this stinking city.

Right, don't interrupt me. I need to develop my point. OK, it's all about Positive Liberty versus Negative Liberty: Freedom *For* versus Freedom *From*. What's more important to you? Just to be told that no one's going to interfere in your life? Or do you want a government that interferes all the time, in the hope of transforming you into the best human beings you can possibly be? Liberal capitalist democracy gives you negative liberty. I want positive liberty, man. I want a government that's interested in me, not one that ignores me. The LLN are the best thing ever.

Look, I once saw a rock band getting signed up by a rich capitalist on a business programme about entrepreneurs. I realised then that music was dead. Well, until this afternoon. The LLN have taken music back from the moneymen. We can look forward to loads of proper bands – not capitalist glove puppets.

OK, you may think we're glorifying Peter Finch by showing those clips from *Network*. There are two responses to that. First, Finch is dead. Secondly, the message of that movie is consistent with everything the LLN believes. In the right circumstances, why not use the enemy's own weapons?

They're standing outside gated communities shouting, 'Shame on you!' They're doing the same outside luxury hotels, private clubs, even rehab clinics where the rich and famous dry out.

I hate these LLN people. They're ghastly. All the scumbags are out in force today and they're all banging on about 'the event'. It doesn't matter what the event is. All that matters is that it exists and they have to be there. And they have to be drunk. It's disgusting. Many are finding any place where they can sit down and swig from their two litre bottles of cider. The luxury apartments in this area have been turned into public toilets. One guy stopped in the middle of the street and started pissing. His girlfriend squatted down and watched him. They were about 16 or 17. It was appalling.

The more famous they were, the louder we sang the Who's *Who are You?* You should have seen their faces. Priceless, mate.

It was weird. There was this little boy amongst the LLN crowd, being supported on his dad's shoulders. He was treated like some holy child. Everyone was high fiving him. It was as though he were the future, a sign that the struggle would continue. He was the physical embodiment of *Hope*.

You know all that muzak in the shops? It's designed to numb you, isn't it? To make you a compliant consumer. Kind of like brainwashing. Are we all becoming automatons? That's why I love the LLN. You know what they're scrawling on the walls everywhere in Greenwich: '*Wake up!*' Fantastic.

Get with the programme. It's a colour rebellion. Everywhere, bold colours are appearing. They're painting houses and flats, and even streets and lampposts. Really bright colours like yellow and scarlet. There are stripes on buildings. Geometric designs. It's psychedelic.

I saw guys walking through Brixton with bandoleers over their shoulders. They looked so cool. But is it legal? They were calling for a *Day of Rage*. I don't know what it means, but I love the sound of it.

It was so funny, geezer. There was some ludicrous ceremony full of nobs banging on about the 'heroes' of the last twelve months, and handing out prizes and medals and all that shit. We stood outside and played that old Strangers' song at maximum volume. You know, *No More Heroes*. It was mint, geezer.

Listen, chief, the world is full of Pharaohs and Pharisees. This is the Exodus. Let my people go. It's starting to happen. It really is. We're going to be free at last.

I heard that a rich guy accused the LLN of wanting to create some sort of Killing Fields regime. That's rubbish. We want a Holiday in Cambodia. Get it, mate?

We're not communists. The purpose of communism is to produce ranks of identikit nobodies. We are meritocrats. Our aim is not to promote nobodies to the status of somebodies but to the status of people...with dignity, an identity, genuine worth.

You can create revolutions with music. It simply depends on what the songs are and how loud you play them. And we're playing them bloody loud! It's great, isn't it? I've never known anything like it. It's a sound rebellion – high volume rock music to wake people up at long last. I'm getting out there to enjoy it. Power to the people.

Advertisers are the most evil people on earth. They work out what your buttons are, and then press them relentlessly as though you're a lab rat, simply to make you consume junk and make them rich. I've had enough of it. Come on the LLN.

Galt turned off the radio. 'So, Future Man,' he said to Greg, 'do you think you called it right?'

36

Greg, Dosh, Rex and Lucinda again went through their routine of watching the evening news in their private cinema. Greg got the distinct feeling Dosh and Rex were more agitated than usual. They were particularly quiet.

'Today's widespread disorder in the streets of London ended an hour ago,' the newsreader said. 'Copycat disturbances in other parts of the country have also ceased. It is rumoured that the Prime Minister was about to order soldiers onto the streets. Downing Street has declined to comment.

'The other main news on this extraordinary day is that John Galt, the world's richest man, has been kidnapped, and speculation is rife that he is the latest victim of the serial killer known as the Midas Murderer. The controversial businessman was last seen getting into his limousine after a board meeting at Fountainhead Tower, his central London HQ. The limousine was discovered burnt out two miles from his country mansion in Surrey. There was no sign of the chauffeur or Mr Galt. Police have refused to

speculate at this time but rumours are rife that the LLN may be involved in Galt's disappearance. Mr Galt had a fierce exchange with the leader of the LLN at a Tribunal of Enquiry earlier in the day.

'A spokesperson for the LLN denied any knowledge of Mr Galt's whereabouts, and also denied that the LLN had engaged in a premeditated attempt to disrupt the capital, maintaining that they were simply carrying out lawful demonstrations. The spokesperson did however acknowledge that the LLN sent cards to the six thousand members of the *Organisation*, an alleged global group that the LLN say is ruling the world.'

Rex switched off the TV. 'Jesus, do you think Galt is...'

'I feel sick,' Dosh said. 'This can't be happening.'

'Not Galt of all people,' Rex said. 'It's impossible.'

'I don't want to think about it,' Dosh got to her feet and started walking around the room, arms tightly folded.

Greg sat there, stunned. He had no idea what to make of the news. He just couldn't believe that John Paul had anything to do with this. And even more unbelievable was the idea that Galt might be dead. Men like that were indestructible.

'I'm sure Galt will be OK,' Lucinda said unconvincingly. 'No one could get the better of him.' She rubbed her hands nervously. 'And what about this *Organisation*? How ridiculous.'

'What was that about cards?' Greg asked.

Rex took two cards from the back pocket of his jeans and handed them to Greg. 'They arrived in the post this morning. One for me and one for Jenny. They're identical.'

Greg took the cards and read aloud the top one: 'The LLN announce the death of celebrity. You are invited to the final ever event in the celebrity calendar: Sunday, 26 February, Los Angeles. The following day is Zero Day, when the world begins again, without celebrity and the riches of avarice.'

'Is this a joke?' Lucinda gazed at Dosh and Rex. 'You're not part of an organisation, are you?'

'It's simply a group of influential people,' Rex said. 'There's nothing sinister about it.'

'Los Angeles, 26 February? What's the significance?' Greg asked.

'It's Oscar Night,' Dosh replied.

'Oscar Night? – but you'll be there.' Greg shook his head. 'Why are we taking this seriously?'

'What are you talking about?' Lucinda said. 'You're the one who told us celebrity was coming to an end. Those cards agree with you.'

'I meant as a trend, not on a specific day at a specific event. That's just loco.'

'But even as a trend, there's bound to be one thing that happens that people will look back on and say...that was the tipping point.'

'Fair enough, but these people are predicting it so accurately in advance.'

‘Well, they’re the ones controlling the process. And what’s more symbolic than Oscar Night?’

‘I just don’t see how they can pull it off.’

‘But they’re amazingly intelligent. You said so yourself.’

‘Couldn’t we pay them to leave us alone?’ Dosh said. ‘What went wrong with our system?’

‘*Our system?*’ Greg queried.

‘Come on, you know how things work. The system looks after all the movers and shakers, all the resourceful people. It finds them good, well-paid jobs that keep them onboard with how things are done.’

Greg stared at her. The sheer cynicism of these people. He couldn’t believe he’d actually been feeling sorry for them.

‘The system is simple.’ Dosh was oblivious to Greg’s frowns. ‘Only a small number of people matter. The rest are sheep playing follow the leader. The system can ignore them.’

‘Ignore billions of people?’

‘Why do you sound so surprised? If God didn’t want them sheared, he wouldn’t have made them sheep, right?’

‘I’ve never heard anyone putting it so bluntly before – apart from Galt.’

‘We have to be blunt now, don’t we? Our way of life is on the line. I don’t understand how the system failed to spot the people behind the LLN. These people are *brilliant*.’

That last word drilled into Greg. They *were* brilliant. Dosh’s question was right – why hadn’t people like that succeeded in Dosh and Rex’s system? The truth hit him. He wasn’t like them. He wasn’t brilliant in any way. He was just a pawn. Bottom line was that the LLN were a new system that didn’t like the old system. Would he be any better off under them? Wouldn’t a new elite emerge? Wouldn’t he still be a nobody?

37

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Thomas Rankin was developing a physical aversion to the Media Centre at Scotland Yard. He associated it with grim news, awkward questions, and accusations that he was incompetent. Someone always demanded his resignation. Today, he hesitated even longer at the door. He would have to talk about the kidnapping of a close friend, and, more importantly to the watching world, the richest man on earth. He didn’t have much reason to hold out hope. After all, he’d already seen the piece of evidence that sent the coldest shiver of his life through him. Confirmation would need to wait for twenty-four hours, but he already knew what the answer was.

‘I won’t be taking any questions at this juncture,’ Rankin said. ‘I will simply read a prepared statement. I can confirm that a party or parties unknown have abducted John Galt. His disappearance may be connected with the kidnappings and subsequent murders of four other individuals who share a similar profile. As many resources as possible have been committed to locating Mr Galt. Two hours ago we received a package containing a severed finger. DNA analysis is underway and the results should be available by tomorrow. We have no specific evidence that the LLN have any involvement in this matter, but this will be one line of enquiry.’

‘I would appeal to the LLN activists who today took part in what they regard as legitimate demonstrations to desist immediately. This is mayhem for its own sake. Many criminal acts were performed during the day and we are analysing CCTV footage to determine the individuals responsible. We are determined to bring all of the culprits to justice. I reject claims that the police lost control of the situation. In the face of unprecedented civil disruption, my officers behaved in exemplary fashion, and every law-abiding Londoner should be proud of their efforts. I will not comment on any rumours that the army were on the verge of being called into action.’ He put his notes down. ‘Now, I’m sure you appreciate how important it is for me to return to my duties immediately. Thank you.’

38

Greg was in his room, staring out of the window over the Thames, when he heard a knock on his door.

‘It’s open.’

Rex came in. ‘People used to love me, Greg,’ he said. ‘What changed? Am I such a horrible person?’

‘Sit down,’ Greg said. ‘Would you like a drink?’

Rex slumped into a seat. ‘Give it to me straight.’

‘It’s greed. Everyone thinks you’re greedy.’

‘Am I?’

Greg nodded.

‘But you’re rich as well.’

‘There are two differences. First, no one knows who I am, and second I’d be happy to give it all away if every other rich person did the same.’

‘Would you?’

‘Yes,’ Greg said resolutely. It was easy for him to say, of course, since he didn’t actually have any money, but he genuinely believed he would if he did have the cash.

Rex shook his head. ‘If I gave it all away, I’d be ordinary. Everything I do is designed to make me extraordinary. I’m scared of being a nobody, of

waking up every day and having no one to treat me specially.’ He stood up. ‘Come with me. I’ll show you something to make you understand.’

Greg couldn’t believe he was being shown into Rex’s secret room. Why did Rex trust him so much? He anticipated an Aladdin’s Cave of bling. He presumed there would be endless shelves of trophies, souvenirs, gold bars, jewellery, bling to end all bling. In fact, the room was practically empty. A luxurious circular black leather sofa was in the dead centre of a spotless room with polished wooden floorboards. LCD TVs covered the walls. Lighting was provided by spotlights built into the ceiling. There was nothing else.

‘Remember I told you about the guy who said our life is a movie and we all have the duty of making our movie as great as possible,’ Rex said. ‘Well, I took that message to heart. I’ve made the film of my life. I want to know what you think.’

They sat down and Rex dimmed the lights until they were in darkness. The LCD screens came on, and Greg was treated to the ultimate home movie: the life of Harry Prince aka Rex. Sometimes, the screens were synchronised and showed identical images, at other times every screen showed a different image.

There was never a movie quite like this. It showed video clips of Rex as a kid, playing at the beach, going to school for the first time, taking part in a school play, winning football trophies. Then football took over completely and the movie showed Rex’s progress through the Chelsea reserves, into the first team. Often, a particularly important incident was shown from many angles. Rex was pictured scoring dozens of goals for club and country. The most important and spectacular ones were shown at normal speed and then in slow motion. The movie lovingly showed the adulation of the crowd, the virtual religious worship. Rex was the Messiah.

Then came pictures of Rex at awards ceremonies, at glitzy parties, surrounded by other fawning celebrities, going to luxury restaurants, opening supermarkets, doing book signings, being chased by screaming girls, his face always lit by a million flashlights. Everywhere he went, he was greeted by cheering crowds, hysterical fans, beautiful girls, paparazzi and journalists, the full celebrity circus.

The movie continued with pictures of Rex and Dosh’s courtship, conducted in the full glare of publicity. The nation’s most revered footballer and its most worshipped soft-core porn star: a combination made in tabloid heaven, a wet dream for sleazy tabloid editors. Footie and tits, balls and inflated boobs. Sex, celebrity and sport. A perfect storm.

Then there were images of Dosh and Rex getting married. They hired a stately home – a Tudor palace in Sussex – and pretended they were royalty. They might as well have been. Dosh arrived in a fairytale glass coach drawn

by Snow White's seven dwarves while Rex arrived on a white horse, wearing gleaming gold armour as though he were Lancelot. After the rings were exchanged, they put on bling crowns of diamond and gold. While they clinked champagne glasses, the guests opened white boxes they had been given earlier, each releasing a single butterfly. Soon, dazzlingly coloured butterflies were fluttering around the bride and groom. 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree,' an onscreen message said. Dosh and Rex smiled at the cameras and said, simultaneously, 'We love money. Who doesn't? It gets you things. It gets you what you want.'

Then came pictures of glamorous holidays. Holidays everywhere, in every beautiful location on earth including the Maldives, Machu Picchu, the Barrier Reef, Sugarloaf Mountain, Nepal.

After that was the sex – mind-boggling, taken by hidden cameras. Anyone who could get hold of this footage would become the wealthiest man on earth. It was porn that went off the scale. Rex sniggered. 'I've been with some fine ladies.'

Christ, Greg thought, he wasn't kidding. He barely knew where to look. There, in front of him, was Rex in full action – fucking a different gorgeous girl on every screen. Blondes, brunettes, raven-haired, redheads. Short hair, long, curly, wavy. Black, white, Asian. Big breasts, small breasts, narrow hips, wide hips, long legs, shaved, trimmed, hairy. You name it, every type was there. While he thrust and grunted, the girls moaned and sighed and screamed their heads off. Doggy, missionary, anal, oral, spanking, slapping, spitting, girl on top, reverse cowboy, spoons, water sports, cock rings, vibrators, the whole Kama Sutra.

'You have to try everything, don't you?' Rex said.

'Aren't you taking it all a bit far?'

'You think? It's because I'm scared to miss anything out. I don't want to regret a single thing.'

'And what about, um, Dosh...does she...?'

'She knows I've strayed a few times. But this is my movie, not hers. My life is my responsibility. I want my movie to be the best ever.'

'Do you think that's possible?'

'Well, don't you want my life?'

Greg thought about it for a moment. In all honesty, he thought he was staring at hell. There was an entire dimension missing from Rex's movie – reality. The movie was hyperreal from beginning to end. It didn't come into contact with authenticity at any point. It was just a hollow fantasy. Every image seemed fake, and everyone in it fake.

'You don't like it, do you?' Rex didn't wait for an answer. He stopped the movie and brought up the lights. 'Listen, I want to watch the news now, if you don't mind.' He flicked to the news channel, to Greg's relief. Greg suspected the news had become a way for Rex to escape from his problems. He could immerse himself in the troubles of others.

The first headline was startling.

‘The Serpent artefact discovered by a British archaeological team has been stolen from Oxford University where it was being subjected to various scientific tests,’ a newsreader said. ‘LLN activists are suspected.’

39

Rex’s movie had unnerved Greg. It made him wonder what kind of world he was living in. So much conspicuous wealth, so many mind-blowing experiences. And yet something lay underneath: a dreadful emptiness, a vacuum that went on forever. Was that what it was like to be God? How lonely he must have felt in a universe in which he alone existed. He craved others. Above all, he craved equals, but that was the one thing he could never have.

Greg went to see Chloe, still at work in the Sex Room. A pair of diamond bondage cuffs linked by a diamond chain lay in front of her. She was putting the finishing touches to a jewelled penis sheath that Dosh wanted to give Rex for his birthday. It was designed to be attached to a gold pouch for Rex’s balls. Greg shook his head. What the fuck?

‘You like?’ Chloe asked. ‘Pure bling, huh?’

‘You wouldn’t catch me wearing it.’

‘Yeah, but you’re a total bore.’ Chloe got up from the table where she was working. ‘Hey, what do you think of this?’ She showed Greg a chairlift. ‘You strap yourself into the chair and then travel slowly up this diagonal beam. At the top is a mini movie theatre. You pull back a curtain and watch a porn movie. Except it’s no ordinary porn. It features computer-simulated avatars that you can programme to resemble any famous person, or yourself and your friends if you want – your enemies as well, if that’s what floats your boat. They’re strangely human yet not quite. Then you watch them bonking the life out of each other in every conceivable position. It’s mind-blowing, such a turn on. Rex loved it when he had a sneak glance. He programmed himself into it.’

I bet, Greg thought.

‘What’s wrong, Greg?’ Chloe asked after a few moments. ‘You seem a bit down in the dumps.’

‘I don’t know. I feel a bit spooked.’

‘Why?’

Greg didn’t want to admit he was disillusioned. He still quite liked Dosh and Rex despite their excesses and ugly snobbery that surfaced all too frequently. Up close, he didn’t think their lives were enviable. Behind all the razzmatazz they were painfully ordinary. He didn’t believe they were oppressing people like him, as the LLN claimed. They were quite sad really, lacking the intelligence or malice to be a threat to anyone. They were spoiled

and selfish, for sure. Money came too easily. Sycophants flocked around. But so what? He'd never want to swap lives with Rex. He thought of him as a little lost boy, stuck in a delicious sweet shop with all the money in the world but with no idea of what to do other than stuff his face. What then? 'I guess I'm fed up,' he said. 'It's all so fake. I hate this lying, this play acting.'

'But that's what you do, Greg – you're an actor and you're doing a great job. You've fooled everyone. I love the way you're so low key. It's a brilliant performance.'

Jesus, a performance. Greg felt nauseous. That's exactly what it was. 'I think I want to confess to Dosh and Rex,' he said. 'It seems like the honest thing to do, the way to become real again.'

'You can't be serious. What would the LLN say?'

'I don't care.'

'You're freaking me out, Greg. This is the best thing that's ever happened to us, all three of us. Next year we'll be able to have tea at the Ritz for real. The longing will be over. It will be real, in 3D and full Technicolor...our dream come true at long last.'

'Christ, don't let John Paul hear you saying that. Tea at the Ritz would make him sick now.'

'Oh, never mind John Paul. I'll talk him round.'

'Listen to me, Chloe, I'm just not comfortable with what we're doing.' Greg looked around the Sex Room with all of its garish exhibits. There was a life-size fibreglass model of a nubile naked blonde with her legs wide open and ready for action. She was mounted on a rocking machine and if you inserted a pound coin into a slot you could literally ride her. It simply emphasised Greg's hollow feeling. 'I want to tell Dosh and Rex that I work for the LLN. I think I want to apologise.'

'God, you're not on some Catholic guilt trip, are you? Are you looking for absolution and all that shit?' Chloe bowed her head. 'You'll expose me too if you say a word. You can't do it.'

'It's the right thing to do. You know it is. We can't keep up this farce.'

'I like Dosh and Rex, even if they're a pain in the neck sometimes. I think they're basically good people. So what if they're rich? They deserve to be famous. I don't want you ruining things for me.'

'You just like them for what they can do for you.'

'That's not true.'

'You're supposed to be a member of the LLN, Chloe.'

'Well, I'm not anymore. I quit.' Chloe threw her hands in the air. 'I've been watching the lights going out. Floor by floor, a new floor every night.'

'So what?'

'I don't want them to go out, Greg. We all know what it means. It's the LLN removing the stars. What would we do in a dark world? I want to *see*.'

Greg gestured around the room. 'You think this is the light, Chloe?'

'You're talking about my art.'

'I have to say something to Dosh and Rex. I just have to. It's doing my head in.' Greg flopped into a chair that had a naked girl painted on it. He felt so stupid.

'You can't involve me,' Chloe said. 'It's not fair.'

'But if I confess, they'll soon find out about you. I think they're already suspicious.'

'They mustn't know about me, Greg.'

'I can't live this lie any longer. I don't like looking at myself in the mirror. I barely know who I am.'

'I beg you, Greg, don't do this. Promise me.'

That night, an hour after he'd gone to bed – but long before he got any sleep – Greg heard a soft knock on his door. He switched on the light and went to see who was there. He found Chloe, wearing a figure-hugging silk gown. She was beautiful. For a moment, he was taken aback by just how beautiful. 'What are you doing here?'

'It is this what you want?' She opened her nightgown and she was naked apart from black stockings and suspenders.

Greg stared at her. In all the years, he'd fantasised about Chloe, he'd never imagined she would be quite this stunning. He'd never seen anyone so breathtaking, so perfect. He longed to reach out to her, to put his arms around her and feel that body pressed against his. It was driving him mad standing so close to his dream of so many years. Yet there was another feeling: disgust. He knew Chloe didn't have any genuine sexual feelings towards him. All she had proved was how obsessed she was with celebrity and wealth. 'Get away from me,' he said.

Chloe looked at him in astonishment. 'You don't want me?'

'You have no idea, but never like this. You're behaving like a whore.'

She slapped his face. 'How dare you?'

The blow stung, but Greg didn't move. 'Look at yourself, Chloe. What's happened to you?'

'You're a bastard.' She closed her gown again. 'I'll never forgive you if you tell Dosh and Rex.'

40

The next morning, Greg got a call from Rex to come up for breakfast. He wasn't in the mood after what had happened with Chloe, but he agreed. As he walked past Chloe's door, it opened and she appeared in the doorway. She didn't say anything, just stared at him. He couldn't decipher her expression, but it made him feel empty and sad.

Breakfast for Rex was a simple boiled egg with toast, and a glass of orange juice. Dosh had an energy bar and a glass of grapefruit juice. Greg settled for cornflakes and milk. He was hoping to sit quietly and get on with it. His head was overfilled with concerns. After a night going over in his mind what had happened with Chloe, he'd decided not to go ahead with his plan to tell Dosh and Rex. He wasn't sure it was the right decision, but he felt committed to it now.

'We want to know what you make of the news,' Rex said.

'What news?'

Rex passed him a copy of *The Times*. 'Front page.' Rex tapped it with his finger.

Greg peered at the main story. 'The Serpent's Tale,' the headline said. 'It was confirmed today that the LLN were responsible for the theft of the so-called Eden Serpent. They have now made astonishing claims regarding the Serpent. They released the following statement:

Paradise Regained

We have taken the Eden Serpent to prevent it falling into the hands of the rich and famous. So many of the world's treasures are hidden from the people because they are in the private collections of the wealthy. Works of art belong to the world, not to the greedy few. The Eden Serpent is not only the world's greatest treasure, but also the most important artefact of all time. We realised that the ancient book found at the Eden site contained an instruction manual for the use of the Serpent. We have now succeeded in repairing the damage that was done to it so long ago. The sabotage was not irreversible, as the Eden community believed. We have restored it to full working order, and we will soon reveal its unimaginable power to the world.

We are confirming our earlier promise that the world will change forever on the day of this year's Oscar Ceremony on Sunday 26 February. The change will be infinitely deeper than even we had believed. We will restore the planet to the way it was in the beginning. We will bring back the Garden of Eden. The world should prepare.

Greg looked up, unsure what expression to adopt. At one level, he found the words seductive, maybe the most exciting he'd ever read. At another, he knew it must be some stunt. How did the LLN think they could pull this off? Weren't they setting themselves up for a huge fall when they failed to deliver?

'Well?' Dosh asked. 'Is this the future?'

'This beats everything,' Greg said. 'I like to stick to trends supported by evidence. This is a religious statement. It's about miracles.'

‘So you don’t believe it?’ Rex asked.

‘Even if what they say is somehow true, how can they be sure they’ve successfully repaired it and that it will work on the day? I mean they haven’t done any tests, have they?’

‘We have a really bad feeling about it,’ Dosh said. ‘The LLN are out to get us. They’ve always said so. This paradise they’re talking about won’t include us.’

‘It’s speculation. I don’t see why it should worry you.’

‘Imagine you were starting a new world,’ Dosh said, ‘with a new Garden of Eden. Would you have people like us around? Wouldn’t everyone be equal and all that sort of stuff? You wouldn’t have rich and poor, would you? It’s paradise for everyone, not for some.’

‘But it’s not paradise for us,’ Rex said. ‘All of this,’ – he gestured around – ‘we’ll lose it all. Everything we’ve worked for will vanish. All the hard work and effort we’ve put in...all for nothing.’

‘There’s another part to the LLN’s story,’ Dosh said. ‘At the end of the article it mentions that the LLN are holding something called *The Great Refusal*. It’s scheduled for tomorrow.’

Greg called John Paul after breakfast, but the number was dead. He spent the rest of the day in his apartment, mostly staring down at the river. He felt sick. The whole LLN experience had turned sour. His dream of sleeping with Chloe had become a nightmare. Their friendship was finished. He suspected things were going the same way with John Paul. Was the LLN worth his two best friendships? He barely understood the LLN now. What was all this religious mumbo jumbo? He had no clear vision of where it was going.

He went to bed early, but had an unsettled night. He drifted off into one of those unsatisfactory sleeps where you awake more tired than you were before you went to bed. It took him a few seconds to clear his head. Then he remembered – today was the LLN’s Great Refusal. John Paul had mentioned it a few days ago, but without giving too many details. Would it work? Maybe part of him hoped it would fail and this whole bizarre episode in his life would end.

He spent the day watching the news on TV, seeing how the LLN’s plan unfolded. A newsreader reported that few celebrities and super-rich had ventured out. Where they risked it, they were uniformly met with a refusal to offer them any services.

‘We refuse,’ staff said to anyone on the LLN’s blacklist. And they always used ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ because that showed they were part of a movement. It was a chillingly effective tactic and instantly became the LLN’s rallying cry.

An LLN spokesman said, ‘It’s all about the Emperor’s New Clothes,

isn't it? People who are stark naked in terms of talent can get the rest of us to watch them parading around as though they're gods. There are no smart children around to puncture the delusion. Remember the two tailors in the fairytale? They said that anyone who couldn't see the Emperor's new clothes was stupid and unfit for their job. That's what the untalented celebrities say to us: we're dumb if we don't see them in the finest clothes. And they're right. We *are* dumb. Because we play along. We even start to believe it...but not anymore. Now we refuse. Today is our Great Refusal.'

At midday, the LLN constructed a statue of Guy Fawkes outside the Houses of Parliament. They stuck old anarchist posters on the gates, saying, 'Vote for Guy Fawkes – the only man ever to enter Parliament with honest intentions.'

At one o'clock, ten thousand members of the LLN marched down the Mall to Buckingham Palace. Police were caught unawares. The protestors carried pirate flags. They stood outside the gates and jeered the Queen, then cheered when a black van painted with the skull and crossbones threw open its back doors to reveal a huge music system. It blasted out the Sex Pistols' anthem *God Save the Queen* at full volume. 'And her Fascist regime,' the protestors chanted, and gave the Nazi salute.

The right wing newspapers were spewing the next day. 'Send them to the Tower,' one proclaimed. 'Anarchy in the UK,' said another. 'Is this a revolution?' A leader article pronounced, 'The LLN are threatening our entire way of life. They must be stopped.'

Greg knew exactly what the LLN's reply would be: 'We refuse to be stopped.'

41

Greg spent the following day indoors too. He felt he was as much a prisoner now as Dosh and Rex. Like them, he spent too much time watching the news. The images transfixed him. The whole country was gripped by the unfolding story – a surreal revolution that no one understood.

More and more people were flocking to the LLN's flag even though they didn't understand what that flag, the pirate flag, represented. The Great Refusal had been a huge success. Employers were too scared to take reprisals.

LLN protestors stood outside Enterprise Tower, always ready to boo the rich residents. Their favourite chant, one that Dosh and Rex said cut right through them, was, 'Dead rich, dead famous, drop dead.' They also defaced the outside walls with assorted slogans: 'Dead beats'; 'Dead weights'; 'Dead ends'; 'Dead heads'; 'Dead space.' And, in huge capital letters in red paint, 'JUSTICE AT LAST. THE LLN ARE COMING. EVERYTHING IS GOING TO CHANGE.'

Judging by the international news frenzy, the whole world was absorbed by the notion that a group of radicals was promising to bring celebrity to an end at a specific time and place – the Oscar ceremony of all places – and that they were claiming a new Eden was about to grow from the least promising of soil. What was for sure was that the global jet set of the rich and famous was getting increasingly concerned about the turn of events in Britain. The fuse had been lit, and the bomb could go off everywhere.

Greg was flabbergasted by the midday news. It showed police raiding the LLN headquarters at the converted sugar refinery in Hoxton. Deputy Assistant Commissioner Simon Greest headed up the operation and was keen to make a statement outside the warehouse.

‘The LLN are suspected of being responsible for the recent manipulations of stock market prices,’ he said. ‘We believe they have used sophisticated financial instruments to engage in unprecedented speculative and destabilising bets. Forensic accountants are currently trying to get to the bottom of a massive market position that has been created in the last few weeks, the full implications of which are unknown at this time. The LLN leadership are also to be questioned in connection with the kidnapping of John Galt and the murders of four individuals. We raided this warehouse in Hoxton in the last half hour and we have placed seven directors and a secretary under arrest. The only other employees of the LLN on site were two cleaners and a man who performed a shoe-shining service. They have also been taken in for questioning.’

Greg couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He watched as the arrests were replayed over and over again and the usual squad of rent-an-opinion media commentators were interviewed in TV studios to give their thoughts on what was going on.

He wondered if the LLN did indeed have a connection with Galt’s kidnapping. No matter how obnoxious Galt was, he didn’t deserve to be abducted, tortured and killed. But surely the Midas Murderer was behind it. Why hadn’t he been caught yet? Surely he didn’t work for the LLN?

Later, pictures showed the LLN’s leaders being applauded by hundreds of activists as they were brought to Paddington Green Police Station in a police van. Their supporters played David Bowie’s *Heroes* to serenade them.

Greest made another appearance and displayed several documents that had been retrieved from the LLN headquarters. The documents, he said, concerned suspicions that the infamous 1929 Wall Street Crash was deliberately engineered to allow rich cartels to force many businesses into bankruptcy so that they could then buy up their assets at rock-bottom prices.

The documents highlighted the case of Congressman Louis McFadden who spent much of his career attacking the power of banking cartels. McFadden said of the Wall Street Crash, ‘It was a carefully contrived occurrence. International bankers sought to bring about a condition of despair, so that they might emerge the rulers of us all.’ After surviving two

assassination attempts, he was poisoned at a banquet.

After another financial crash – allegedly a trial run for the Wall Street Crash – Congressman Charles Lindbergh, father of the famous aviator, said, ‘Under the Federal Reserve Act, panics are scientifically created. The present panic is the first scientifically created one, worked out as we figure a mathematical equation.’

Greest stared straight at the nearest camera. ‘Green highlighter pen was used to emphasise the final sentence,’ he said triumphantly. ‘We believe the LLN are trying to create a new Wall Street Crash, and a global Depression.’

42

Greg re-read all of the briefing documents the LLN had given him at the start, trying to discern any plan. Nothing emerged.

One thing that did catch his attention was the LLN’s take on dialectics. There was something mystical about that subject, and the LLN seemed to understand it inside out. They pointed out that the traditional form of dialectics was always regarded as progressive. The idea was that one thing would arise – the thesis – that would in due course generate opposition to itself – the antithesis. Then there would be some sort of struggle and a compromise would emerge – the synthesis. This would then form a new thesis, which would generate a new antithesis, a new struggle, a new synthesis and so on. Each time round, the process got more refined, with the thesis, antithesis and synthesis steadily converging. Eventually, there would be no appreciable difference and the process would be at its endpoint.

The example the LLN provided was the English political system. For centuries, an authoritarian monarch ruled – the thesis. Eventually powerful barons opposed the monarch – the antithesis. There was conflict and the monarch was forced to grant concessions – the Magna Carta, the synthesis. A Parliamentary system was created – the new thesis. The monarch then sought by hook or by crook to get Parliament to obey him, raise taxes and support his wars – the next antithesis. Parliament and the monarchy clashed repeatedly, culminating in the Civil War. Parliament executed the king and monarchy was abolished. At this stage, one part of the dialectic – the monarchy – was wiped out. Rule by Parliament was now the new thesis. But the people weren’t happy with a Parliamentary dictatorship. They longed for monarchy again – the new antithesis, and renewed conflict loomed.

So, monarchy was restored in the shape of the dead king’s son, but he was now under strict Parliamentary control. And so on and so forth until today – a constitutional monarchy where Parliament runs everything but the monarch is retained as head of state. Throughout the process, the ordinary people were also getting more of a say. Ordinary landowners were given the vote, then ordinary householders, then minority groups like the Catholics,

and then women, until every adult over 18 had the vote. All of it a dialectical progression.

But the LLN made two points. First, it was farcical for Britain's political dialectic to end up as a constitutional monarchy – a hopelessly muddled compromise. Why not a Republic? Why not a meritocracy instead of a democracy? The political dialectic, the LLN said, was incomplete in Britain. They were the new antithesis.

Their second point was that the synthesis phase of the dialectic was often an illusion. One side or the other might win an unconditional victory. Hitler's Nazism didn't take part in any synthesis of the post-war German political dialectic – it was simply killed off. The dialectic was often more liable to achieve that outcome than a useful synthesis. So, there was no guarantee that the dialectic was progressive. And there was even the possibility of negative dialectics where a thesis and antithesis led to a disastrous synthesis – things going backwards.

Greg wondered what the dialectic would do with the current situation. Would there be some synthesis between the rich and the LLN, or would one side or the other be eliminated? Maybe the LLN had targeted Galt for execution after all. Maybe the Midas Murderer did indeed work for them. Something else occurred to Greg. Maybe a rogue part of the LLN went after Galt. One name leapt out – *Dominic*. He had completely vanished. Didn't he say he was in the TA once, and a marksman?

At 9 o'clock at night, a police spokeswoman appeared on the steps of Paddington Green Police Station.

'We have the following statement to make regarding the arrests of several men and women from the LLN's HQ this morning,' she said. 'All seven individuals representing themselves as directors of the LLN were discovered to be unemployed actors. Their secretary was also an unemployed actor. As for two cleaners and a shoe shiner, the local Job Centre had only recently sent them to the LLN HQ.'

'All of the unemployed actors said they were paid a small amount of money to play these parts. They believed it was part of a reality TV programme documenting a fake social upheaval. Their street leader – a man called John Paul Harker – was confirmed to be a former mobile phone salesman who had volunteered to present himself as the LLN's leader. He maintained it was a legitimate movement, and had no connection with reality TV. He said he had never at any stage met the leaders of the LLN in the flesh, although he had spoken to them on the phone. A courier delivered all of his instructions to him. A courier was subsequently interviewed by police and confirmed making several trips to Mr Harker's address. The courier worked for a bona fide delivery company, and had no knowledge of what was contained in the packages for Mr Harker.'

'At this time, the identities of the true leaders of the LLN are unknown. There is no trail, and no leads. They took elaborate measures to ensure there

were no clues leading back to them. Investigations are ongoing. Meanwhile, we encourage all supporters of the LLN to desist from participating in illegal assemblies. Any law breakers will be arrested and dealt with accordingly.'

Greg was astonished. A few minutes after the spokeswoman made her announcement, John Paul was shown on the steps of the police station, making an impassioned speech.

'These arrests were an outrage,' he said. 'The police didn't have a shred of evidence against us. We did not kidnap anyone, we did not kill anyone. Look to others for that sort of thing. This is all about the rich and famous running scared and trying to put pressure on the LLN. But we're not going away. Not now, not ever. Don't forget, the world changes on Oscar Night. The police can arrest as many of us as they can lay their hands on. It won't make the slightest difference.'

He received a rapturous reception from his supporters and they raised him onto their shoulders.

'We do have a secret leadership,' he yelled over the din. 'What of it? If they weren't secret, they would be in jail by now, at the mercy of our enemies. And, yes, I am an unemployed mobile phone salesman. Does it make me a lesser human being? Let me tell you this – it's a slow death for most of us, our tedious lives unfolding uninterestingly year by year, our skin flaking off and becoming the dust we breathe in. Money wins. It always does. Money talks. It shouts and screams and bullies and always gets its own way. But not anymore. The LLN are the cure for this most malignant disease.'

Within hours, it was reported on TV that there was a huge campaign on the internet insisting that celebrity was ending, that the rich would soon vanish. The world would be born again, cleansed and purified. A world without division, without conflict, without greed. A reporter highlighted an LLN website showing a digital clock counting down to the *End of Celebrity*. Another site showed a bling ruby crown with a pair of crossed solid gold Kalashnikovs beneath it, and sparkling diamond dumdummy bullets scattered around. 'Dumdummy bullets for the last Bling Kings,' was the website's title. 'The rich and famous live in Bling World,' the site said. 'They looted our communities to build their bling palaces. Bling – the vulgar display of wealth – is their unholy creed. Without their bling they're nothing. Load the dumdummy bullets into your Kalashnikovs. Shoot up Bling World. Torch the palaces of the looters. Take back what is ours.'

A third site referred to *Los Galácticos* – 'the superstars' – of Real Madrid. Once a term of wonderment and worship of football's most expensive and glittering players, it became a synonym for vain, egotistical, overinflated, overpaid, ineffectual players who never tried, and didn't care. It was used, in the end, to mock the team. 'Aren't all of the rich and famous in

the world Los Galácticos?’ the site asked. It also mentioned the Maldives – the playground of the rich and wannabe rich – and laughed at the irony that as global warming intensified, the first place to sink beneath the waves would be these idyllic islands where those who thought they were better than everyone else loved to indulge themselves.

Greg switched off the TV and lay on his bed. It was really happening. The world was changing. He had tried not to see it, but it had been obvious for days. The signs were everywhere. The LLN were having a huge influence. Sales of celebrity magazines had slumped dramatically and some were already going out of business. Scores of upmarket restaurants were in distress and many were closing. Few people chose to drive around in flash cars any longer. Luxury yachts were abandoned or left unsold. No one went to Premiership football matches. Footballers earning £200,000 per week played in empty stadiums in front of TV cameras broadcasting to no viewers. No one watched chat shows, reality TV, anything in any way linked with the promotion of the cult of the rich and famous. Designer labels were rarely seen. Anything that marked you out as wealthy was uncool.

Had wealth and fame gone out of fashion? *Permanently?*

43

The next day, an LLN email campaign capitalised on John-Paul’s triumphant run-in with the police. Every email address in the world was targeted, and they all received the same email:

Subject: The Twilight of the Bling Kings. The End of Evil.

Text: And now we shall explain the origin of evil. The Book of Eden says that the Serpent device generates four imperceptible ‘soul beams’ that directly target the human soul. One beam makes whoever it touches obsessed with being superior to others. One beam makes those it touches obsessed with the desire for everyone to be equal. One beam makes those it touches prepared to acknowledge the superiority of some people. The final beam makes those it touches prepared to deny that anyone is superior.

The first beam creates the evils of the world: tyrants, the super rich, celebrities, discrimination, elitism, arrogance, contempt, vanity, greed, materialism. It creates political movements such as Fascism, Oligarchy, Plutocracy, Conservatism, Apartheid, Militarism. It’s the Right Wing beam.

The second beam creates goodness in the world: it produces carers and helpers, fosters respect for others, it spreads kindness, unity, community, compassion, humility, charity, spirituality. It leads to pacifism, social democracy, civil rights, human rights, community, social welfare. It’s the Left Wing beam.

The third beam makes people susceptible to the first beam and prepared to go along with the divisive, unequal, unjust world the first beam creates.

The last beam does the same job for the second beam: it makes people prepared to go along with equality, fraternity and liberty.

There are several rules. 1) If the first beam touches your soul, no other beams can affect you. 2) If the second beam touches your soul, no other beams can affect you. 3) If either of the third or fourth beams touches your soul, neither of the first two beams can affect you. 4) If the third beam touches your soul, the fourth beam will affect you too. 5) If the fourth beam touches your soul, the third beam will affect you too.

In short, the first two beams give you a fanatical adherence to one way of life or its opposite, while the latter two beams make you susceptible to both ways of life. A man who in one environment may become a willing Nazi may, in another, be a charity worker.

The original settings of the Eden device – the *Paradise* settings – ensured that the first beam was switched off, making the third beam redundant. The second beam was targeted at five percent of the population, and everyone else went along with the equal, kind and compassionate society those five percent created.

Satan worked out how to interfere with the device and succeeded in activating the first beam – Eden’s true forbidden fruit – but he thought long and hard about how many people he wanted to target with it. If he decided to make it affect the whole population, it would result in a savage, short-lived world of lethal violence between rival fascists. The human race would die out very quickly. Satan wanted to find a way of creating a conflict that would rage forever. Although he detested the humane effects of the second beam, he realised he shouldn’t switch it off. He left the second beam at its original setting, and placed the first beam at exactly the same setting: so that it also targeted five percent of the population. The third and fourth beams both affected the remaining ninety percent of the population, creating “doublethink” in their minds – the ability to be cruel or kind depending on the circumstances.

And so Satan succeeded in creating the *Hell* option: the arrangement of beams best designed to create unending human misery and perpetual conflict. He sabotaged the controls so that his settings could not be reversed...until now. We have the ability to alter the settings to whatever we like. All things are possible. Naturally, you would expect us to return the world to the Paradise option of perfect human equality. But we won’t. We have decided not to switch off that first evil beam that makes five percent of the population so vain and egotistical that they expect to be worshipped by the rest of us.

Instead of the Paradise settings, we are opting for the *Justice* settings. This involves permanently switching off the third beam – the one that makes ninety percent of the population susceptible to the influence of the evil five percent. So, the evil five percent of egotists will live on, but now no one will

be listening anymore. They will lead the sad, empty, frustrated, unfulfilling lives that they for so long inflicted on the rest of us. Now it's their dreams that will be crushed by the system. They will rage against the machine, but their efforts will be as vain as those of all the poor, dispossessed masses throughout the ages. Their lives will be lived out in a vacuum. They will be an eternal reminder to the rest of us of how the human race lives on the razor's edge. One wrong move and we would again be plunged into the hell of celebrity, wealth and the appalling politics of superiority.

The LLN say *Never Again*. We must always be vigilant against the five percent who seek to enslave us. But with Eden's miraculous Serpent device to guide us, we can look forward to a new Golden Age. The Greed Machine is about to self-destruct.

Peace out!

Greg spent hours going over and over the email. It was truly inspiring, though scarcely credible. It promised to turn good and evil into a straightforward equation. Get the right answer and you'd have a perfect world. Get it wrong and you could create any nightmare you liked. But surely it was all mumbo jumbo. It was impossible. Wasn't it?

While he was looking at YouTube videos that, with amazing creativity, tried to portray what the perfect new world would look like, he got a call from Rex, sounding upset, and asking him to come straight round to his secret room.

The door was wide open when Greg reached the Fun Floor. Straight away, he saw that the Bling Land sphere was smashed to pieces. Shocked, he hurried to find Rex. The star footballer was sitting on the circular leather seat in the centre of his secret room.

'The lights on the twentieth floor have gone out,' Rex said, staring into space. 'Twenty floors in darkness. A new floor every day. Always getting closer.'

'Haven't Galt's experts got anywhere with that yet?'

'They don't have a clue.' Rex shook his head. 'There are saboteurs in this building.' He gestured around the room. 'They've been in here. They've ruined it. They've ruined everything.'

'What do you mean?' Greg couldn't see any signs of damage in the room.

'Look at what they've done to my movie,' Rex said. 'They're sick.' He played his movie once more, but this time all the pictures of glamour and success were digitally overlaid with images of decay and ruin: slums, dilapidated homes, collapsing buildings, withered old men and women, children with bloated bellies and bulging eyes, footballers with broken legs, old supermodels with sagging breasts and prune-like skin, old age pensioner

sailors whose once-vibrant tattoos had faded into ugly smudges and smears. There were images of liquefied human fat and uncleaned toilet pans, of old men and women sitting alone in care homes, shunned by the world.

‘Dorian Gray,’ each screen said.

‘Who’s Dorian Gray?’ Rex asked.

‘A character in a novel by Oscar Wilde,’ Greg explained. ‘He stayed permanently young while a painting of him, locked in his attic, grew older in his place. It became hideous, the most repulsive thing of all time, the truth beneath the veneer. Any corrupt, wicked act he performed was reflected in the painting, but never in his real face, which remained flawless.’

Greg’s interpretation was that the LLN were saying that ordinary people undergo the hideous transformations revealed in Dorian Gray’s painting in full view of everyone else, while the Dorian Grays of the world – people like Rex – go on blissfully unmarked by life, or use the most expensive cosmetic surgery and miracle chemicals to hold back the ravages of life.

‘Celebrity mustn’t die.’ Rex suddenly gripped Greg’s arm. ‘Don’t let them take it away from me.’

44

Greg was walking along the riverbank when the call came. He didn’t recognise the number showing on his mobile phone. ‘Hello?’

‘It’s John Paul. I’m watching you right now. I’m one hundred metres behind you, standing next to the bridge. Come and meet me.’

As Greg turned, he felt a shudder of revulsion. Ever since John Paul had joined the LLN, he had been changing. He’d turned into a humourless fanatic. Greg slowly walked towards him, wondering at the way things had turned out. Although he was part of this radical new movement, he felt detached from it. He was a sideshow before and he was still a sideshow.

‘I want you to be Judas,’ John Paul said without wasting time on a friendly greeting.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You heard. I need my Judas.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘This is a religion now and every religion needs its martyrs and its traitors, a human story that changes hearts and minds. Truth doesn’t matter. The human race is shaped by narrative, not logic. That’s where scientists and philosophers go wrong. They have intellectual power, but no one cares. People want stories that move them to tears. They long for heroes, saints and sinners, good guys and bad.’

‘Are you saying you want me to betray you? Did the LLN put you up to this?’

‘Don’t you see? I have a real purpose in life now. I’ve bummed around for years, drifted along on anger, frustration, self-delusion, you name it. I was pissed off with everyone and everything, most of all with myself. Now I can be immortal. Do you have any idea what that feels like? My life would be justified. *Eternally*.

‘I never understood Jesus Christ until now. I always thought he was insane to go ahead with being crucified even though he must have known there was no God. But he wasn’t mad at all. He gave his life so that he could live forever. It’s the greatest story ever told. You don’t fear death when you’re in that position. It’s the price you pay. Death comes to us all. Why not transform it into glory? We all have the chance, but we’re cowering in the trenches rather than going over the top into the hail of bullets. I want that bullet with my name on it. If it doesn’t exist, I’ll write my name on it myself.’

‘This is crazy talk.’

‘If you won’t do it, I’ll get someone else. I can change the world. I’ll be the symbol of the new world, free of the rich and famous. Jesus Christ fucked up. His message was beautiful, but too easily corrupted. He preached love, but so many of his followers are full of hate. He blessed the poor, but it’s the rich who sing his praises loudest. Christianity has become the perversion of everything Christ stood for. I’m the antidote. I’m the person who’s going to correct all of his errors and make things right again. The truth is that if you believe in human equality, you can’t allow anyone to be too wealthy or famous. Those cancers have shaped our sick and dying world. Hypocrisy is maximised. It all comes back to the narrative...the narrative of success. We’re junkies for it. But it’s a death wish.’

‘You’re the one with the death wish. What’s happened to you, John Paul?’

‘You’re just not understanding. The Book of Eden said a human sacrifice is needed to make the Serpent device work. The blood of a martyr must be shed.’

‘But isn’t that fabricated? Didn’t you tell me that? Didn’t you say the LLN planned all of this?’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I never said anything like that. The expedition in Iran was real. The Book of Eden is real. The Serpent artefact is real. The world’s greatest experts said so.’

Greg stared at his friend and suddenly had no idea what to believe.

‘They want to kill me,’ John Paul said.

‘Who does?’

‘The enemy. The powers that be. The police. The old order. They want the LLN to go away, for things to go back to the way they were before we ever showed up. All I’m asking you to do is hand me over to them. Just make it easy for them, as easy as Judas did for Jesus’ enemies. Deliver me on a plate.’

‘You’ve lost it, John Paul, you really have.’

‘Listen, the whole thing about Judas is just for the sake of a good story. It isn’t real. It never was. Not even the real Judas was a Judas. Think about it – the way he betrayed Jesus was to kiss him to identify him to his enemies. What no one has ever asked is why if Jesus was such a threat, such a big deal, such a prominent person, such a charismatic man with the aura of God himself, it was necessary for someone to have to identify him. The whole thing’s preposterous. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey through a particular gate, as was prophesied of the Messiah, and was greeted by thousands of ecstatic people waving palms – yet we’re supposed to believe that no one in authority could recognise him days later, and Judas had to do the dirty work for them. But we all know the authorities had spies and secret police everywhere. They would never have needed Judas. Even if, impossibly, they couldn’t recognise Jesus, they would simply have arrested everyone they found in the Garden of Gethsemane and sorted it out later.

‘The truth is that Judas didn’t do anything wrong. He was there to help the story along. Nothing more. Actually, that makes his role seem trivial, but it wasn’t. The story *is* the message. You need to find a way to betray me to our enemies. Offer me up as a sacrificial lamb. Let them do the worst to me. They want to kill me and they will. If you’re my friend, you’ll do this for me.’

‘I’d never help to kill you. That’s totally sick.’

‘They’re going to do it anyway, just as they did to Jesus.’

‘Who’s going to do it?’

‘*Them*. The high priests of the old temple, the Pharisees, the establishment, all those who will lose everything if the LLN succeed.’

Greg turned away. ‘This is lunacy. I’m walking away.’

‘That’s us finished,’ John Paul yelled as Greg strode away. ‘And it makes no difference anyway. I’ll get someone else.’

45

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Thomas Rankin couldn’t believe he had to deliver this news. John Galt always seemed invincible. Everyone had their name on a bullet, except him. He could march into the middle of a firefight and every bullet would whiz past. Or that’s how it had seemed.

Rankin once again opened the door to Scotland Yard’s Media Centre and saw the rows of cynical faces of the reporters and journalists. He sat down and read his statement.

‘This afternoon, after being tipped off by an engineering company that had been commissioned to produce a number of unusual components for an

unspecified machine, police raided a disused warehouse in Whitechapel in the East End of London.'

'The officers discovered a body, presumed to be that of John Galt. He was the victim of horrific torture. Apart from cutting off his little finger and sending it to us, his killers had used their torture apparatus to inscribe symbols on his body. They then set light to him and hanged him. A placard was placed over his chest saying, "The King of the World."

'His body is unrecognisable. This was a savage and deranged attack. They wanted to deface him, to erase him. His jaw was smashed and his teeth extracted and ground into dust. We'll have to rely on DNA identification to confirm that this was Mr Galt.

'The machine used to inscribe symbols on Galt and the four other victims was found in full working order. When I say killers rather than killer, I should emphasise that this is our working assumption due to the complexity of this operation, but, in principle, only one person may be responsible.

'A book was found near the torture device: a collection of short stories by Franz Kafka. The device was based on the one described in Kafka's story *In the Penal Colony*. The victim is laid on his front on a metallic bed and then held in place by a restraining apparatus. A large steel needle called the *Harrow* sets to work. This instrument can forcibly write in the flesh of its victim any word, phrase or sentence its controller desires.

'There are many clues in the warehouse that forensic experts are currently examining. You will be informed as soon as we make any significant breakthroughs. As I've mentioned before, our biggest ever detective team has been assembled to handle this case, and my deputy is in personal charge of the investigation. We will leave no stone unturned in bringing the killers to justice. These monsters must be stopped. Anyone in the Whitechapel area who has noticed any suspicious movements in the last few weeks, and particularly the last couple of days, should contact the police immediately.

'That concludes this press conference. I am not taking any questions at this point. Thank you for your time.'

46

The next couple of weeks were surreal. Greg went to Galt's funeral. It was surprisingly modest, and sparsely attended. Galt didn't seem to have many close friends or family members. Lots of business contacts sent expensive wreaths with formulaic notes. That seemed to sum up Galt's life. For all his talk, all his money, he never touched anyone's heart. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner was there at the Chelsea crematorium. Dosh and Rex, sitting in the front row, were distraught. They said Galt's horrific death gave them nightmares and they took the precaution of hiring

extra security. As for Lucinda, she seemed strangely distant from the whole thing, despite her previous closeness to Galt. Sure, she showed up for the funeral, but there were no signs of grief. She didn't stay for the reception. Those that did had a few awkward drinks and then left. The whole thing amazed Greg. What a way for the Colossus to take his leave of the world. No ceremony, no show, no fanfare. The wealth of Midas had produced the most forlorn of funerals.

Greg didn't hear anything from John Paul. The LLN didn't get in contact with him. Chloe had stopped speaking to him. The lights in Enterprise Tower continued to go out floor by floor, at an accelerating rate. Only the top five floors remained lit. In a little while the darkness would envelop Greg's floor. No one had discussed what would happen then.

The police had made no progress in their search for the Midas Murderers. Meanwhile, LLN activity had ceased. They stated that everyone should prepare in private for the forthcoming transformation of society. Attendance at churches shot up. Millions had caught the religious bug. Many others were sitting on the fence, waiting to see how things unfolded. An odd atmosphere had descended over the nation. Much of the world was equally afflicted.

More and more material was appearing on the internet promoting the LLN's political wing – the Meritocracy Party. The idea was that after Zero Day, a new political era would be ushered in and meritocracy would replace democracy. Democracy, according to the LLN, was nothing but an instrument of mass manipulation exploited by the rich and famous to keep the multitudes in abject servitude. The UK was the prime example of the deceit – the nation called itself a democracy and yet its head of state was a monarch. As the LLN pointed out, it was ludicrous to assert that the people were in charge, and that elections were the cornerstone of the system, and then have an unelected monarch sitting at the top of the tree. So, the first step in the people's liberation was the end of democracy. And in a meritocracy, monarchs would be illegal by definition.

Greg liked what he read about meritocracy, but he didn't believe the people would buy it. They were too conservative, too in love with the past.

Most celebrities stayed out of sight. As for Dosh and Rex, they just shut out everything and concentrated on preparing for the trip to Los Angeles for the Oscar ceremony. They never spoke about the LLN now. They acted as though the ceremony would be perfectly normal. They were in complete denial.

Greg was amazed that he and Chloe were given invites to accompany Dosh and Rex to LA. Whatever else could be said about them, they were incredibly generous. But it was also obvious that they, like Galt, had few genuine friends.

He couldn't work out a consistent attitude towards them. Sometimes he liked them, sometimes he felt sorry for them. Sometimes they sickened him with their greed and arrogance. At other times they seemed comical or like

acts in a freak show. They were frequently vulgar. Despite all their wealth, status and fame, they had no class at all.

The big contrast was with Lucinda. Everything about her was tasteful and elegant. She never put a foot wrong fashion-wise, she was highly intelligent, and she was funny and charming when she wanted to be. Greg had discovered a lot about her in the last few weeks, mostly from Dosh. Lucinda was a posh girl, educated at private school and then Oxford University where she studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Her family fell on hard times – her father didn't manage their stately home well and practically went bankrupt.

One thing was increasingly apparent. She despised Dosh and Rex, and put on a front whenever she was with them. Dosh and Rex mentioned it sometimes. They clearly loved having a reluctant aristocrat at their beck and call. Dosh had never forgiven the upper classes for snubbing her at a croquet event. She was barred entry to a posh hospitality tent for being 'too common'. Now she was getting her own back.

Greg, to his regret, rarely spoke to Lucinda on the few occasions when they were alone together. They sometimes bumped into each other because their apartments were so close, but their encounters in the corridor were uncomfortable and fleeting. But one day, when Lucinda was visibly tearful, Greg asked her how she was. She looked at him for a moment, apparently surprised.

'I'm OK,' she said softly. 'Thanks for asking.' For once she seemed vulnerable, all of her normal confident veneer absent.

Greg thought she looked even more beautiful than usual. For a moment she seemed pleased by the way he was looking at her, but just as quickly it seemed to irritate her and her old self flipped back into place.

'Still making nothing of yourself, eh? You spend most of the time locked in your apartment. Who's imprisoning you? Yourself?'

Greg had still never managed to find an answer to those familiar charges.

Lucinda smirked. 'Cat got your tongue again?'

'Why are you so rude to me? Since we first met, you've been nothing but hostile.'

'We both know why.'

'Sorry, I have no idea.'

Lucinda gave him an enigmatic smile. 'Your trouble is that you're too nice, and that's why you're a loser. The people who succeed are on the make, on the take. They're the kings of being fake. Show me anyone successful and I'll show you a disgusting creep, but at least they're imposing themselves on life. Nobodies never do that.' She leaned in towards Greg. 'When I imagine a world of nobodies, it makes me shiver. It's not the wealth of the rich that makes them special, it's their other qualities. The rich are those who take what they want. They dominate life. With someone like you, life is always taking from you.'

‘But I’ve heard you saying how much you detest the nouveau riche.’

‘Yes, I do. It’s their vulgarity I loathe, not their wealth. They got rich because they had balls, not because they had taste. Their bling is ghastly, but it symbolises their larger-than-life attitude. They’re life’s high rollers. They don’t crawl along in the slow lane with the losers.’

‘Don’t you resent the way they treat you?’

‘It’s true they like having me around to humiliate me, but that’s their right. They’ve earned it.’

‘How can you say that?’

‘I accept facts. They own me, don’t they? I mean, let’s get real. But at least I’m better off than you.’

‘No one owns me.’

‘Who are you kidding? You’re buying into the status game just like everyone else. You’ve accepted an inferior position. That’s what’s stopping you from living. You can never respect yourself once you’ve given up aiming for the top.’ Lucinda poked Greg in the chest. ‘You’re fading away. You nobodies are ghosts.’

‘What?’

‘You’re a fraud, Greg Raslow. An unsuccessful fraud.’

Greg shuddered. ‘How do you know my real name?’

‘I knew it right from the beginning. You didn’t have the aura of a rich person. I didn’t bother checking any of your references. If I had, none of them would have stood a second’s serious scrutiny. Instead, I got a private detective to check you out.’

Greg stood there, silent.

‘Don’t worry,’ Lucinda said, ‘I won’t turn you in. I want to see what you do, and I’m curious to see how the LLN try to hijack Oscar Night. You’re coming, aren’t you?’

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The next time Greg saw Lucinda, she was fastening her seat belt next to him. He hadn’t stopped thinking about what she’d said. Perhaps the smart option was to pull out, but here he was. Maybe it didn’t matter that Lucinda knew he was a fraud. As long as she kept it secret, nothing had changed.

‘Which private school did you go to?’ he asked as the plane took off. Just small talk. He didn’t care what the answer was.

‘Fettes College in Edinburgh,’ Lucinda said with a wicked smile. ‘They called it the Eton of the North. We called it Foetid College.’

And so it went on. Hours of pointless conversation. They kept staring at each other. Sometimes, Greg thought, Lucinda looked at him in a way that made him think she liked him. At other times, her stares were cold, even

contemptuous. Then there were times when she looked sad and lonely. At one point, she got up out of her seat and said she was going to speak to a friend she'd noticed at the back of the plane.

Greg sat quietly on his own for a few minutes, gazing at the back of Chloe's head. She was sitting a few rows ahead of him, next to Dosh and Rex's manager. She hadn't spoken to him for days, but he suspected she didn't care. After all, her work was starting to attract attention in art circles and she was on the verge of achieving her dreams. The irony was that the LLN could take it away by exposing her.

He picked up an in-flight magazine and flicked through it. It was even more rubbish than usual. He put it back and stared out of the window until Dosh and Rex interrupted him.

'We thought you might like some company,' Dosh said.

Rex leaned forward. 'So, Greg, what do you think is going to happen at the Oscar ceremony?'

They kept asking this same question: dogs gnawing on a bone. His position hadn't changed. 'Either everything will go ahead as normal, or the LLN will succeed. If I were playing the odds, I'd go for the first option, but I've learned never to underestimate the LLN. I mean, if they don't do what they've said, they're finished, aren't they? I can't believe that such smart people are going to make a catastrophic error like that. They must have a trick up their sleeves.'

Rex nodded. 'That's what I think, but Jenny says I'm talking rubbish.'

'It's my big night,' Dosh said. 'They're not going to ruin it for me. I won't let them.'

If nothing else, Greg admired her spirit. Yet he couldn't deny that part of him wanted to see how she would react to failure. Would she still be smiling for the cameras? What would happen when she tried to sell her story but no one wanted to buy?

'How are you getting on with Lucinda?' Rex asked. 'Are you hitting it off?'

'She's a nice girl.' Greg tried to be neutral, to avoid revealing how much he liked her.

'She keeps it quiet,' Rex said, 'but she does a lot of charity work.'

Greg remembered the standard LLN response to that line: *Yeah, it's how these people disguise their greed.* Yet he liked the idea of Lucinda doing secret charity work, especially the secret part. Wasn't that the proof that someone had compassionate intentions, that they weren't doing it simply for the sake of their public image?

'Don't breathe a word of this to her, but her father's dying,' Dosh whispered. 'He's got acute angina. He's already had one serious heart attack. She goes to visit him in hospital every day. That's why she's been so fragile lately. She was thinking of cancelling this trip, but her father urged her to come.'

One of the airhostesses came over, whispered to Dosh and then led her away towards the cockpit. Rex followed. The three returned a few minutes later, accompanied by two stewards.

‘Tell us this isn’t true.’ Dosh waved a piece of paper in front of Greg. It was short and to the point.

Re passenger “Gerard Lambert” on Flight AER 320 London Heathrow to LAX:

We have received information that this individual is an impostor. His real name is Greg Raslow. He’s an unemployed actor, recently recruited by the LLN. Police are waiting at LAX to detain him.

Greg stared at the words, then at the faces peering down at him. For a second, he imagined making some sort of defiant, heroic speech, ending with a clenched fist and a cry of, ‘Long live the LLN.’ But he didn’t say any of that. He barely felt part of the LLN now. They never contacted him, never asked him to do anything. Maybe they were the ones who had turned him in. Perhaps that was the point all along. They wanted to show Dosh and Rex how close they could get to them, how the stars could never be safe. He didn’t care. He felt lethargic, resigned to his fate.

‘Yes, it’s true,’ he said apathetically.

Dosh and Rex were aghast.

‘I can’t believe it.’ Rex kept shaking his head.

‘We regarded you as a friend.’ Dosh’s face was ashen. ‘We brought you into our home. We trusted you. How could you do this?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry?’ Dosh spluttered. ‘That doesn’t begin to cut it.’ She turned to Chloe, who had come over to see what was going on. ‘And you? Please tell us you’re not in on this too.’

‘No, definitely not, I swear it.’ Chloe made no attempt to look at Greg, focusing on Dosh and Rex instead. She was almost whimpering like a pet dog. ‘I admire both of you so much. I’d never do anything to betray you.’

They seemed satisfied, and turned back to Greg.

‘Was it you who broke into my secret room?’ Rex asked. ‘Were you the one who sabotaged the lights in Enterprise Tower?’

‘I didn’t do anything. I wasn’t asked to. And if I had been, I’m not sure I would have gone ahead anyway.’

Dosh and Rex turned away.

The two stewards gestured to Greg to get to his feet. ‘You’re coming with us to the back of the aircraft. If you cause any trouble, we’ll handcuff you.’

Greg shrugged. ‘No need for cuffs.’

He was marched to the rear, and put in a corner seat. A steward sat at the end of the row. Half an hour later, Lucinda came by. She asked the steward if she could sit next to Greg and he let her through.

‘You turned me in after all,’ Greg said when she had taken her seat beside him.

‘No, it wasn’t me. I told you before – I was curious to see how things would turn out, what would you would do.’

‘Well, now you know.’

‘Not quite what I expected.’ Lucinda brushed some fluff off her jacket. ‘Tell me, why did you get into this in the first place? Did you see yourself as some Spartacus figure, leading the slaves in rebellion against their cruel masters? You don’t seem the sort, I’m afraid.’

‘I just liked the idea of a fair society, everyone getting an equal chance. Nothing grand. I wanted the high and mighty to be taken down a peg or two. I was no firebrand.’

‘I wish you had been.’

Greg frowned. He was disgusted with his own inaction. Years ago, he thought the only thing holding him back was lack of opportunity, but he didn’t have that excuse anymore. Why was he so passive? Events ran over him. He longed to be the sort of person who made things happen. Shit, he’d blown it, hadn’t he?

‘Good luck with the police,’ Lucinda said. ‘You could be in serious trouble, but maybe they won’t be too harsh. I mean, you didn’t get up to much, did you? You didn’t take any money, you didn’t do anything violent or threatening, you didn’t steal anything. All you did was watch. The opportunity of a lifetime and you just observed.’

Greg stared out of the window. He was miles up in the air, but he’d never felt lower in his life.

At the airport, Greg had to endure hours of interrogation, but it was relatively low key. It appeared that Dosh and Rex wanted to bury the matter for fear of bad publicity. They would look like idiots easily duped by the LLN, so they chose not to press charges, but the police arrested him for the felony of passport fraud. He was expecting to be held in cells, but a lawyer greeted him and told him he’d been bailed pending a court appearance. Someone had agreed to act as guarantor for him.

‘Who?’ he asked.

Lucinda appeared at the lawyer’s shoulder. She gave a little smile.

‘Why?’ Greg asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe, deep down, I always liked Spartacus.’

Greg didn't know what to do. He was free in LA, but he didn't know anyone, and, now that he was persona non grata amongst Dosh and Rex's entourage, he had nowhere to go. He was certain of one thing: he wanted to be at the Oscar ceremony when the Witching Hour came, when the LLN attempted the impossible.

Lucinda offered to let him crash on the sofa in her suite as long as he kept a distinctly low profile. It astonished him how generous she was being to him. It seemed out of character, but he had no intention of declining her offer.

On the early afternoon of Oscar Day, she was standing at the balcony, looking preposterously glamorous in her shimmering silver Oscar dress. But Greg noticed the slightest of tremors in her shoulders and realised she was crying. He stood there, watching her, unsure what to do, and amazed. Would she hate to be seen in such a vulnerable state? Yet he was curious too. For a moment, a flash of resentment sparked in him. He remembered all the times when she had been so high and mighty. He wanted to see tears in her eyes, running down her cheeks, staining her designer dress. Ms Perfect brought down. How the mighty have fallen.

But then he felt terrible. Was she grieving for her father? Maybe she'd just heard the worst news. He went out and stood close to her at the balcony, being careful not to look directly at her. 'Nice evening,' he said.

'Bastard.'

'What?'

'Don't play the innocent. You're loving it, aren't you?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Come off it. I hate the games people play.'

They stared at each other. The tears on Lucinda's cheeks were glowing red in the sunlight. She was so beautiful, like an angel out of time.

'Go on, suck it all in. I'm sure you've been praying for it.' She looked depressed, even scared. 'Why don't you say it?'

'Say what?'

'Anything. Say you're sorry. Say you feel my pain. Ask who the man is.' Her bottom lip trembled. 'I don't do rejection. It's not supposed to happen to me. Why did it end like this?'

Greg wondered what he should do. He had a ridiculous idea that he could take Lucinda in his arms and tell her how much he cared for her. How stupid could he get? 'Why did you bail me out?' he asked. 'I didn't think you would be sorry to see me in jail.'

'You're in your own jail already, Greg. I was hoping...' She shook her head. 'No, forget it.'

‘Hoping that I’d change, become more like the men you admire? Or did you do it just so you could treat me with even more contempt?’

Lucinda stared into the distance and gave an ironic laugh. There was an almost imperceptible shake of her head. ‘The day of the last men is coming, isn’t it?’

‘Sorry?’

‘He always talked about it.’

‘Who did?’

‘Galt. Who else would I be talking about?’ She tidied away a hair that had fallen over her face. ‘You know who the last men are, don’t you?’

‘They’re the men who will exist at the end of history. Nietzsche talked about them.’

‘That’s right. John agreed with Nietzsche that if things keep going the way they are, we’ll end up with a humanity that’s an insult to everything great and noble. Nietzsche said the last men will be men without chests. They’ll spend all their time engaged in trivial concerns, finding new ways to cater for their petty needs. Imagine a whole world of lawyers, accountants, managers, advertisers, administrators, shoppers. Isn’t that our future?’

She spoke so passionately that her blue eyes seemed to glow. She looked stunning, the red light caught in her hair. Greg put his arm round her and, for a second, she let him. Then she pushed him away. ‘You?’ She practically laughed.

‘I just thought you needed a shoulder, you know.’

‘I know all right. You want me. And this is your attempt at seduction. This is your *move*.’ She spat out the last word. ‘And you know what, I bailed you and brought you here because I was hoping you *would* make a move. You’re so different from him. Crazy, isn’t it? How could I have been so stupid? The idea of us...’

Greg didn’t know what to say. He felt so ashamed, so inept. He turned and walked away.

‘That’s right, run away little boy. My lover was a bastard, but at least he was a man.’

49

Greg left the hotel and made his way to the Kodak Theatre where the Oscar ceremony was taking place. He walked slowly – it was only a couple of blocks – all the time going over in his head what had happened with Lucinda. Obviously, she and Galt were an item at some point. It sounded as though he’d dumped her just days before he was murdered, and she was still hung up on him. The grieving she should have done at his funeral was happening now.

Her insults were still reverberating through him. Was he a ‘last man’ like

she said? It was all too easy for him to picture himself as a wheezing, feeble man with no chest, fading into oblivion. The only thing that kept his mind off his self-disgust was the significance of today. As the start of the Oscar ceremony got closer, the air itself seemed to be changing, filling with crackling electricity. The storm was about to break. Whatever strange thing the LLN had planned for the world would happen tonight or never. Their new religion, if that's what it could be called, would gloriously begin or dismally end. It was as though the whole world were holding its breath. Would it be Zero Day, or business as usual? If the LLN failed, the rich and famous would be more powerful than ever. Can everything come down to a few moments? Maybe just one.

An expectant crowd was in position outside the Kodak Theatre, having successfully passed through an array of airport style metal detectors. The organisers had pulled out all the stops. They'd used a carpet redder than ever. Golden Oscar statues, bigger and better than ever, gleaming in the afternoon sunshine, lined the red carpet. The whole area was bedecked with flowers. They had repainted the exterior of the theatre so that it shone with newness. The message was clear. We can refresh ourselves, reinvent ourselves. We can be whatever you want us to be. We can beat the LLN. It was one o'clock. Four hours to go. Can four hours change everything?

Everything was going on as normal. Excited reporters from every nation were talking into TV cameras broadcasting to the entire planet. Tonight the eyes of the world were focused on this spot. There was immense anticipation for the arrival of the stars. Was it possible for an A-lister to emerge from a limousine as a god one instant and be a nobody the next? Like a light switching off?

A glossy Oscar programme was on sale, full of pictures of the stars at their brightest, gods and goddesses walking amongst us. We are not worthy. As Greg flicked through the pages of impossible beauty – airbrushed, digitally enhanced, remodelled, remade – it seemed absurd that these divine entities could be displaced. The LLN didn't have a hope.

That wasn't to say they weren't trying. In London, eight hours ahead of LA, a vast torch-lit rally was taking place in the centre of the capital. The LLN had called out their entire support to be there at the moment when humanity was freed forever from bondage. John Paul was standing on a stage set up in the middle of Trafalgar Square. Greg could see everything unfolding on huge screens that had been set up around the Kodak Theatre to show what the world was seeing on TV. The Oscar organisers were keen to highlight the drama of the evening, and to show, they hoped, their triumph.

Just after 4 pm, with winter darkness falling in LA, the stars began arriving in their gleaming limousines, and were greeted by the usual barrage of flash photography. They walked along the vast red carpet, greeted by cheers, maybe not as loud as in previous years, but loud all the same. There was no sign of any imminent collapse of celebrity culture. It seemed an

increasingly odd and unlikely outcome. All the screens showing the LLN's rally in London soon switched to coverage of the Oscars. London, it seemed, had been dismissed.

But then American LLN activists appeared from every direction. They pushed through the throng, handing out cards. 'Don't ask the stars for any autographs,' they said. Their cards read: 'I am a person. My name is.....'

'Write your own name on these,' the activists said. 'You don't need to live in anyone else's shadow anymore. The LLN are here to free you.'

Greg was annoyed that he couldn't see what was happening in London, but was distracted by the arrival of Dosh and Rex, followed by their manager, then Chloe and Lucinda. Dosh was wearing a mink coat dipped in gold, drawing gasps from onlookers. The whole group looked perfect, and Greg, for a moment, wished he was there amongst them. They got an odd reception: a few loud cheers and wolf whistles, a few boos and hisses. They seemed awkward, wearing fixed smiles.

Greg's eyes lingered on Chloe for a second, before moving to Lucinda. He would give anything to patch things up with her.

Then it came, the moment when everything changed. A ticker tape message ran across the bottom of the vast CNN screen. Greg froze.

'Breaking news from London,' proclaimed the ticker tape. 'Leader of the LLN shot dead.'

There was a huge gasp. The picture switched from the Oscars to a CNN reporter live on the scene in London.

'It's mayhem all around me,' the reporter said. 'John Paul Harker, the public face of the LLN, was in the middle of a speech, his fieriest ever according to supporters. He was proclaiming the dawn of a new age, saying that in a matter of minutes he would return the world to its original, wonderful state. Then the shot rang out. A sniper, we think. It was a headshot. Harker, we understand from those nearby, died instantly, though we have received no official confirmation.'

'Everyone around me is stunned. After the shot rang out, there was a silence the like of which I have never encountered. We Americans said Camelot was taken from us when JFK was murdered. It feels the same now. Everyone around me is in tears. They look uncomprehending. Some are raging and demanding revenge. They're blaming the police and the rich.'

'Despite the horror, I understand the LLN will be proceeding with the event.' She touched her earpiece. 'I am hearing that Harker has indeed now been pronounced dead by a doctor, but the LLN are refusing to let his body be taken away. Someone on the platform is asking the crowd to remain calm and is insisting the rally will continue. We will return as soon as there are any more developments. This is Kate Metcalfe for CNN. Back to the studio.'

Greg stared at the screen, numb like everyone else. His mouth went dry. God Almighty, they had killed John Paul, just as he predicted they would.

Tears bubbled in his eyes, and maybe those tear drops contained tiny, flickering, liquid images of all the good times they had shared, all the laughter and friendship.

He started to sob. Everyone around him was doing the same. Was this the moment when the world changed? Was that John Paul's plan all along? Maybe the Eden Serpent device was a ruse. It was John Paul's assassination that was the great moment marking the end of the line for the old world. Tonight's Oscar ceremony was already dead. The show's organisers just hadn't understood that yet.

The LLN activists in the crowd, all of whom had stood stock still when John Paul's death was announced, started to hug and console each other. Then one raised his arm in the LA February darkness and flicked his lighter. A little flame appeared, a tiny symbol that expressed so many meanings: honour, solidarity, grief, resistance, endurance, remembrance, defiance. His colleagues did the same. Soon, thousands of points of light broke the black night. A magic dusting of tiny stars. Then everyone else joined in.

A huge digital clock was ticking towards the five pm official start of the Oscar ceremony. Just as the main celebrities were getting ready to enter the theatre, the main screens all broke away from the Oscar ceremony and once more showed what was happening in London, where it was the early morning of the 27 February. Incredibly, John Paul's colleagues were propping up his body in front of the lectern on which the Eden Serpent device was resting. One of them was the rebellious guy who had filmed Galt at the *Alberigo* restaurant fiasco. His name was Josh and he seemed to be standing in for John Paul.

'They can't stop us,' Josh said as the Oscar clock boomed out, signalling the arrival of five o'clock, 'they can *never* stop us. We are the people and we shall not be moved.' He brandished the strange serpent. 'This is our instrument of justice. They have slain our leader, but the movement lives on. We are bathed in the blood of our holy martyr and we are stronger than ever. I will to use our dead leader's finger to activate the Eden Serpent and create eternal justice for the world. They thought they could stop us by removing him, but our leader lives on in our hearts and souls. With this act, we honour his memory indelibly and forever and we transform the world once and for all.' Josh manoeuvred John Paul's finger into position and got ready to press down.

'We shall overcome,' the London crowd sang. Everyone in the crowd outside the Kodak Theatre started doing the same. In Greg's mind, the whole world was joining in. And maybe that was exactly what was happening. The celebrities appeared stunned. Some cameramen put down their cameras and joined the crowd. The singing got louder and louder. Soon it was deafening.

And then Josh in London screamed at the top of his voice, 'It's done. It's over. The old world is dead.' Total silence descended. There was a long pause, almost eerie, a sense of wonder, disbelief, incredible hope.

‘Celebrity is dead,’ Josh said. ‘The super rich are finished. The world is reborn in the beautiful form it was always intended to have. With his dead hand, our messiah has delivered us from this hell of materialism. We are the people of the spirit. We are equal, and we cannot be moved. Here we stand. We can do no other. No one can harm us anymore.’

Ecstatic cheers erupted. People shouted themselves hoarse. Some looked as though they were having fits. The scene resembled the frenzy in an evangelical church when the faith healer has reached the climax of the ceremony and the lame are walking, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the folk in wheelchairs taking their first miraculous steps, when demons are being cast out of the mad.

Ticker tape ran across every screen. ‘Celebrity is dead...astonishing claim by LLN.’ Then came an almighty roar. ‘The Oscar Ceremony has just been cancelled,’ a CNN announcer said. ‘Organisers say that all of the behind-the-scenes staff walked out when they heard of the assassination of the LLN’s leader. The organisers had no option but to halt the show.’

Images of John Paul being taken away on a stretcher amidst grief-stricken crowds were shown. Many of the mourners in London knelt and made the sign of the cross as the stretcher passed by.

Everyone outside the Kodak Theatre fell silent. Rain started falling, slowly at first and then faster and faster until it was coming down in sheets like a Biblical punishment. Everyone started to disperse. Oscar programmes, useless now, were scattered around everywhere, growing soggy in the rain. Greg saw one in the gutter, opened at a picture of Dosh and Rex.

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Greg was fined \$1,000 at his court hearing – Lucinda paid it – deported back to Britain, and banned from returning to the USA. He was glad to go. The atmosphere in Hollywood had turned more than surreal. No one seemed to know how to react to what had happened. People shuffled around with vacant expressions.

Back in London, Greg collected his gear from Enterprise Tower and returned to his little apartment in Hoxton. One of Dosh and Rex’s security team said he would never be allowed back in. That was no surprise. He didn’t think they would be there for much longer either. Only the reception level and the upper three floors still had functioning lights. In days, the Tower would be in complete darkness.

He still had no idea who had betrayed him. It hardly mattered. His time in the LLN was up anyway for all intents and purposes. It had been some ride, but it had added up to nothing in the end. All the action was elsewhere, and he was just a pointless sideshow. But wasn’t that precisely the fate of 99.9% of the human race? He was Everyman. Everyone is at the centre of

their own movie, but absent from the movie of everyone else, other than those of friends, family and work colleagues. Yet celebrities feature in the movies of everyone on earth.

The LLN invited Greg to John Paul's funeral. They were planning a huge occasion, to celebrate the new world. Actually, the world seemed little different from before, but there was no doubt change was in the air, and it was certain the rich and famous were keeping out of sight. That was already enough to persuade the people they were living in a new times.

John Paul's funeral service took place on a Saturday, at Trafalgar Square where he died. It was held at the same time as his assassination – in the early hours of the morning, in the darkness. The atmosphere was extraordinary. Over a million mourners were there. If Jesus Christ himself were being laid to rest, it couldn't have been more poignant. There was a supernatural aura around the whole event.

Leading members of the LLN delivered brilliant speeches celebrating the life of their lost leader. Many great and touching tributes were delivered before John Paul's open-topped black coffin was borne in slow procession on a simple cart drawn by a black horse. The cortege moved towards the Thames, led by a single drummer boy pounding out a slow beat, so simple and emotive. Mourners had tears streaming down their faces. Many threw flowers, and soon the coffin and cart were strewn with red and white roses.

At the riverside, John Paul's aides took his body from the coffin and reverentially placed it on a pyre on a simple black gondola, with John Paul laid on his back, his arms crossed over his chest. The Thames was lined by hundreds of thousands of spectators, most of them throwing wreaths of roses onto the water until the Thames was carpeted red. Huge screens were dotted along the riverbanks to let those who couldn't get a good view see what was going on.

Josh held up a death mask of John Paul's face. Josh's own face was full of pride, compassion, and pain, expressing what everyone was feeling.

'A new dawn,' he said in a voice rent by grief. 'A new beginning. A second chance. One we didn't deserve. Our leader gave his life for us. He changed everything, gave us new air to breathe, clean and joyful. You know what his last words were? "We're all nobodies." Not for a moment did he believe he was special. Thanks to his sacrifice, society is already changing beyond all recognition. Where are the celebrities and the super rich now? How many of us any longer pay them homage? None at all. We have done with touching our forelocks. These people are learning that riches and fame are currencies that are no longer legal tender in our noble new world. Their spell over us has been broken forever. They hide themselves now. They wonder what reaction they will get if they venture out; if anyone will serve

them if they want to buy something, or if they will be shunned and boycotted. Their hour of reckoning has come. Surely they couldn't have believed it would go on forever? But they did, in their arrogance and limitless conceit.'

His words burned with passion, capturing John Paul's brilliance. They seemed to fly out as flaming eagles, soaring over the crowd, shedding bright sparks of zeal over the throng. Greg imagined that Marc Antony must have delivered a speech like this at the funeral of Caesar. The funeral oration of Pericles as he watched plague laying waste great, proud Athens would have been like this. A lament for the lost heroes.

And then Josh said, 'We have to live up to our assassination of celebrity and wealth. All of us bear full responsibility. We must lead magnificent and noble lives to justify what we have done.'

He paused, fighting back tears. 'The rest of my speech belongs to another,' he bellowed, his voice trembling. 'The philosopher Nietzsche has said all that needs to be spoken when you have torn down that which you once held most sacred.'

He then delivered Nietzsche's famous *God is dead* speech, and he delivered it with such searing intensity, such power, that Greg felt sick with inspiration and elation. All the possibilities life has to offer seemed to open up in front of everyone as Nietzsche's blazing words echoed around London and the watching world. As Josh spoke, his colleagues lit the pyre on John Paul's gondola and pushed it out into the fast current.

'Where has God gone?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is more and more night not coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? – gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives – who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed – and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto.'

God is dead was the most vivid metaphor possible for the death of celebrity, wealth, privilege: all the mainstays of the old world. Meritocracy was coming. The people were replacing the old gods with themselves. Prouder, greater, freed from their chains, liberated to march into the future with a chance, at last, to make a real difference.

The people of the world were in a new, unknown land, with infinite possibilities. For the first time, it was up to them, and no one else. Were they worthy of what lay ahead?

Everyone started to applaud. John Paul's fiery gondola lit up the night and was carried out to sea on the strongest current.

51

Was it a revolution? Britain changed quickly, and most of the world with it. Money wasn't the same anymore. Everyone's attitude towards it had changed. It was amazing how, once people saw through the illusion of money, the old systems of power collapsed overnight. Soldiers refused to obey the orders of those regimes that were prepared to use violence to cling to power. Police refused to protect the rich and famous. Without their brute force to back them up, the old powers were as pathetic as the Wizard of Oz.

No one dared to say they were rich for fear that they would become pariahs. Many moved out of luxury homes and abandoned luxury cars. Everything to do with luxury became redundant. Luxury restaurants closed. Exclusive bars went out of business. All manufacturers of luxury goods went bankrupt. Highly paid people started requesting massive pay cuts.

Exactly as predicted, stock markets crashed across the world. Someone somewhere – the mysterious people behind the huge shorting exercise – must have made a killing, but their identities were never revealed. No one much cared anyway. The world didn't go into meltdown. Now that people had lost their obsession with status and possessions, they were happier to take new jobs that didn't pay much, but which met their basic needs. They soon discovered they were much happier.

A general election was called in Britain and after a short campaign the Meritocracy Party swept to power in a landslide victory. They immediately abolished the monarchy and parliament. The country was renamed the United Republic of Great Britain and a new flag was introduced – the black pirate flag of the LLN. The whole country was in a ferment of reconstruction, redesigning itself.

Every aspect of the country was assigned to groups of relevant experts – health, education, defence, the economy, the police and so on. The Fair Pay Act was introduced, making it illegal for the highest paid person in any company or organisation to receive more than twenty times the salary of the lowest paid person. Greed became the supreme social taboo.

An Inverse Pay Act was implemented to penalise the famous: the more you appeared on TV the less you were paid. Instead of getting appearance bonuses you received appearance deductions, so the more you wanted to be in the public eye, the poorer you became. You would have to love what you did if you wanted to do any high profile job. It seemed a reasonable principle to everyone: the more you loved your job, the less you should get paid for doing it since it barely seemed like work. The people to be paid the most were those doing the horrible jobs that no one else wanted. Everyone knew that this principle, almost by itself, would change the world. It automatically brought fairness and justice.

The Financial Disincentives Law was also enacted. This decreed that all high-powered financial jobs should be given to risk-averse men and women over fifty. The financial system was to be there to do nothing other than support investment and the healthy development of the economy. All financial speculation was declared illegal. No one was to be incentivised for taking high risks. Anyone who went ahead and took serious risks and failed was to be held personally liable for any losses incurred.

Advertising was made illegal. There were no more celebrity endorsements of products, no more voiceovers by the famous. The cult of celebrity was dead. All celebrity magazines stopped publication. Tabloid newspapers closed. Reality TV ended. One by one, the toxic sources of the celebrity obsession were plugged. Movies and TV shows now featured mostly unknown, talented new actors. Superstar actors, celebrity pop stars and massively overpaid footballers vanished. The City became a ghost town, preserved as a monument to greed, a warning from history.

The Metropolitan Police Commissioner resigned. No one discovered who killed John Paul and no one was looking too hard. It was the same with the Midas Murderers. They were forgotten. The nation had more important things to think about.

Greg, now getting regular acting parts, heard that some celebrities and rich people who couldn't come to terms with the new ways of the world had set up a commune in the abandoned arena that was once the old Millennium Dome in Greenwich. In the absence of celebrity events, the V Arena, like all the old haunts of the famous, became dilapidated. The old owners sold up and the new owners were unknown. They made no attempt to do anything with their investment.

The V Arena and its counterparts all across the world were like ancient temples and churches, strange reminders of a bygone age and forgotten beliefs. People quickly became puzzled that they themselves had once belonged to the old cult.

But more traditional religions prospered. People became far more spiritual, communal and anti-materialistic. There was a great sense of cooperation, compassion, helping the less fortunate, mucking in, rejecting greed and envy. The status game gave way to the *do as you would be done by*

game. The discovery of the Garden of Eden had brought everyone closer to God. Even atheists were less strident.

The Meritocratic government assigned jobs to everyone who was unemployed. The charity industry was abolished and replaced by an Agency for Public Good Works, to which everyone in the country had to freely give two weeks of their time each year. It was greeted with massive enthusiasm.

Greg, on a free Saturday, decided on the spur of the moment to go to the V Arena. What would it be like to look at the old gods, fading away like the deities of Mount Olympus?

When he went into the cavernous foyer, he found that bins had been pushed over and rubbish scattered everywhere. Some rats were gnawing on rotten food. They scampered away when Greg approached. Posters of famous rock bands were still on the walls, but many were torn and hanging at odd angles.

Greg went into the main hall and was amazed to hear loud voices. People were scattered throughout the arena, watching the stage. Actors were performing a play. Greg was flabbergasted when he realised what it was – a re-enactment of the assassination of John Paul. None of the audience glanced at him. They were sitting, glassy eyed, intent on the stage. Greg sat down to watch the performance.

On stage, a woman in a white mask was talking to a sniper in a matching mask, armed with a high-powered rifle. Then the actress walked across the stage and spoke to actors playing members of the LLN. They were guarding the building opposite the podium where John Paul was giving his final speech. The actress said she had spotted a man with a rifle going into the adjacent building via a trapdoor used for beer deliveries. The LLN guards rushed next door. The actress then signalled to the sniper. He went up the stairs of the first building, took position, shot John Paul, dismantled the rifle, stuffed the pieces into a drainpipe then vanished in the confusion.

The man and the woman then came to the front of the stage, with a spotlight trained on them. ‘And that was how we killed the messiah,’ the woman announced, and took off her mask.

Greg let out a gasp. *Chloe*.

‘I didn’t pull the trigger,’ she said, ‘but it couldn’t have been done without me. Am I a coward? Am I the coward who killed John Paul Harker? He was one of my closest friends. Did I betray him? Am I Judas?’

Greg couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was that how it really went down? Was this whole thing a bizarre confession?

‘But nothing is ever as it seems,’ Chloe went on. ‘I was asked to take a contract out on John Paul. Who demanded it? Was it the rich, the famous, all those who stood to lose everything if the LLN succeeded? No, I’ll tell you exactly who it was – John Paul himself. So, was it murder or suicide? John Paul told me the LLN needed its blood hero, its holy martyr. Innocent blood must be spilled in the name of all great causes. Only the blood bond makes a

mission sacred. John Paul said every messiah needs a traitor – the eternal narrative demands it – and he asked me to play the role.

‘I kissed John Paul on the last day of his life. He looked into my eyes, but he didn’t see me...he was already gazing at immortality. He gave me my payment. No silver coins: a black case full of a million pounds. Of course, he must have known it was absurd. If his plan worked, wealth would become meaningless. My million wouldn’t change my life. It might as well have been a case of toy money. Is that what Judas thought of his silver coins? They were no longer currency. They were guilt rattling in his hand.’

She held up a black briefcase, opened it, and showed off the rows of neatly stacked notes. ‘A few weeks ago, this was everything I’d dreamt of. In the last few weeks I was starting to have the kind of life I’d always sought, but now it’s all gone. Perhaps I can take consolation from the fact that I’m part of history now. I’m the new Judas, condemned to act this part over and over again. Would any of you care to step into my shoes?’ She fell silent.

The sniper took a step forward. ‘Or mine?’ he asked. ‘I am the man who killed our new god.’ He removed his mask.

God Almighty – Dominic.

Chloe and Dominic gave a bow. A few half-hearted claps echoed around the eerie arena.

Greg was nauseated. So, Chloe had madly accepted the role that John Paul once earmarked for him. As for Dominic, was that what bitterness at being passed over could do to you? The LLN’s most fanatical supporter became the man who metaphorically and literally shot it in the head.

Greg had little doubt that what he’d seen on stage was exactly what happened. The police must have known too, but were doing nothing. Did it matter? John Paul once said that Judas did nothing wrong, just fulfilled his part in a necessary story. It was the same with Chloe and Dominic. They did what everyone wanted them to do, so how could they be guilty of anything? Anyway, they’d found their own punishment, and it looked as though it would be eternal.

Greg looked around the enormous arena and recognised many once-famous faces. These sad, pathetic people couldn’t escape their craving for the limelight. They staged plays that only they would ever watch. Would they keep doing that until the final curtain came down at the end of time? He felt he had to do something. He got onto the stage and confronted Chloe. ‘Come away with me.’

She looked at him, but didn’t register any recognition.

‘It’s me, Chloe – Greg. Come on, let’s get out of here.’

‘No, the limelight is here,’ she said fiercely. ‘I’m never leaving.’

‘Stop it, Chloe.’

‘Get away from me. Don’t you see, if we leave the limelight, we’ll disappear.’

Greg realised there was nothing to be done. He gave up and made his

way to the exit.

As he stepped into the foyer, he found a group of LLN activists setting up a soup kitchen. He spoke to one of them and the activist said they came each day to feed the people who stayed here. They gave them medicine when needed, and extra blankets in cold weather.

What an irony, Greg thought. The former rich and famous had replaced the homeless vagrants who'd plagued London for so long. It seemed fitting.

Greg got the feeling that the LLN wanted to preserve these ex-masters of the universe like animals in a zoo, ants in amber. An eternal reminder. Here be tyrants.

High definition DVDs were playing on several large plasma screens. One showed an old City trading room, full of men in braces and slicked back hair, screaming their old mantra: 'Buy, buy, sell, sell.' Another showed celebrities arriving at a ceremony and being transformed into living light by flash photography. A final one showed John Galt on his yacht – the largest in the world – in the harbour at Monaco. It was surreal: another world, another time. It didn't seem possible that people once lived that way...that everyone else allowed them.

An image on one wall made Greg shiver. It showed Enterprise Tower a few days after Oscar Night. It was shot at night, and the Tower was visible only via the reflected light of the adjacent buildings. Greg had never seen such a haunting photograph. The Tower was like some ghost building that time had forgotten but which hadn't quite vanished. It existed, yet, in the dark, it seemed not to. The perfect residence for dead heads.

Beside the photo were handwritten notes that Greg realised must have been penned by Chloe:

'Oh God, all the lights have gone out,' one said.

'I promised to keep them on, but there was nothing I could do,' said another.

'Forgive me.'

Then there was a short comment: 'They were the best of us. They were the beacons that lit up the darkness. They showed us the way. Everything that was bright and joyous belonged to them. But we, in our dark, lowly, bitter world resented and envied them. We plotted against them and finally rose up and overpowered them with brute, crude weight of numbers. We were countless ants burying gods. We switched them off, turned off their lights, and cast them into perpetual darkness. But now we are all in the dark and cold and we are so alone.'

Chloe, Greg knew now, would never recover. She had turned these people into gods and she would go to her grave still believing in them. The rest of the world would move on without her. That was always the way of it.

On the way out of the arena, near the front doors, Greg encountered two people dressed as a king and queen, sitting on ruinous old thrones, staring

glassy-eyed into space, and lethargically sipping Black Martinis. They looked up at him and he looked back in disbelief.

Dosh and Rex.

52

Greg ran hard, trying to block out the thoughts in his mind. The faster he ran, the more he imagined he left those thoughts behind. But it didn't work that way. They were always ahead of him.

It was Sunday afternoon, a warm spring day. Greg sprinted past Parliament, now an empty shell about to be turned into a meritocratic school for kids from the ghettos of inner London. A new Meritocratic Parliament was being built in York. All publicly funded jobs were, as far as possible, being moved out of London and redistributed all around the nation. Embassies had been moved out, the whole civil service, the BBC, all the main cultural institutions. The aim was to halve the population of London within ten years.

Greg couldn't get that image of Dosh and Rex out of his head – the monarchs of bling with no worshippers left. He hadn't exchanged a word with them. They just stared at him, with no obvious expressions on their faces. He got out of there as fast as he could. It was amazing that after those intense weeks they'd spent together, where he'd experienced so many intimate aspects of their lives, every bit of it was now dead and buried. And it would never be resurrected.

He tried to think of positive things. He didn't yet love this new celebrity-free world – it was still too strange and new – but it was getting better every day. He liked the fact that so many people had got rid of their cars and turned to bikes. The air was much cleaner, the light purer somehow. London looked bright, shiny and new.

Yet he still felt unsettled. The long runs he'd started taking on Sundays were getting him fit, but they also gave him plenty of opportunities to dwell on his life. The whole world was changing, but he was stuck. He knew that one of the things blocking him was that he'd never solved the mystery of the LLN. It still hadn't become clear who engineered it all. The men behind the curtains never stepped into the public arena. He felt he couldn't move on with his life until he understood the whole thing.

Another thing perplexed him. The business empire of John Galt – Global Enterprise Solutions – was still in full operation. With its beautiful plate glass HQ overlooking the Thames, opposite MI6's HQ, it was one of London's top architectural landmarks. It always had many security men outside it and gave the impression that nothing much had changed. It seemed separate from the rest of London, some throwback to the past. Why was no one doing anything about it? Who was running it?

Fountainhead Tower, Galt's HQ, had a central courtyard open to the public, offering access to a free art gallery that Galt established years earlier. There was also an observation platform on the roof. Galt once told Greg that he liked to use it for 'difficult' business meetings. 'It unnerves them being up there,' Galt boasted. 'I always get better terms for my deals. There's no factor like fear for making rivals see reason.'

Greg planned to visit the art gallery one day, but he kept putting it off. He always finished his run on the geometric and beautifully tended lawn directly outside the HQ. A fountain stood at the centre and Greg enjoyed feeling the cool spray against his face.

Today, still running at full speed, Greg saw a familiar figure sitting on one of the chrome benches in front of the fountain – Lucinda. He'd always wondered what had happened to her. But instead of going over to her, he kept running. Then he abruptly pulled up. Jesus, what was wrong with him? He had to speak to her. He just had to.

Seconds later, he was staring down at her. 'Hi,' he said quietly.

Lucinda looked up from her magazine and squinted at him. 'Gosh, Greg.' 'Long time no see.'

She seemed reluctant to speak. Greg wondered if he should make his excuses and leave, but instead he sat beside her. 'What are you doing here?'

'I...uh...I work here.'

'You work for Galt's company?'

Lucinda nodded. 'I didn't say I liked it, but a job's a job. It's not as though Dosh and Rex can help me now, or any of the crowd I used to hang with.'

'Who runs the company?'

'Some anonymous person. There are still a few faceless corporate types around.'

'How's your dad?' Greg asked. 'I heard he wasn't too well.'

She stared at the grass. 'He passed away.'

'I'm so sorry.' Greg wanted to take her hand.

'I'm not a nice person,' she said.

'Pardon?'

'Do you think this is all real, Greg? Do you really think nobodies can beat the system?'

'What are you talking about?'

'They can't be stopped.'

'Who can't? I don't understand, Lucinda.'

'Of course you don't. Things are going on. You have no idea what's really happening. You want fairness, justice, an equal chance, but none of those things mean anything to the other side. They'll fight to the death. What are you prepared to put on the line?'

'You've lost me, Lucinda. You're talking as though the LLN didn't win.'

‘Did they?’ She gave an enigmatic smile. ‘You know what they say – don’t get mad, get even. That’s what they did. They didn’t let anything rile them. They never lost control. Not ever.’

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘Sorry, I have to go.’ Lucinda got up and left.

Greg watched her go. What the hell was that all about?

53

Nine Months Later

Greg stared wistfully at the entrance to the Ritz. He was there on the appointed day of the ‘Longing’ – alone, of course. Last year seemed like an eternity ago. John Paul never did get his afternoon tea. As for Chloe, Greg had made some enquiries and discovered she was still at the V Arena. She did some acting, some costume design, some set design, created art installations here and there. The LLN seemed content to keep the V Arena as a freak show. Roll up, roll up: come and see the former gods slowly going mad. There was a community of a thousand ex-somebodies at the arena, living in sleeping bags and tents within the confines of the arena, being fed and clothed by LLN activists as part of the Public Good Works programme.

The Ritz itself had long since closed. When business dried up, there was no alternative. As with many prestigious buildings in London, it was bought by new, unknown owners. It irritated Greg that the Meritocracy Party hadn’t identified these owners, or ensured that these grand buildings were converted to a more meritocratic purpose.

It was a cold day and he pulled up his collar against the chill. This was the last time he would be here for the Longing. It no longer meant anything. Did it ever? Three friends had stood outside a place they couldn’t afford and dreamt of being the sort of people who could go inside and afford everything. It was a dream of becoming someone else, but the real game was about becoming yourself. Greg turned his back on the Ritz and headed for the Tube. As he walked, he considered another anniversary rapidly approaching – John Paul’s death, followed by the LLN’s bloodless coup d’état, history’s true Glorious Revolution.

The whole of London was in a tumult over the anniversary. Everyone wanted it to be the biggest celebration imaginable. Digital clocks had been set up around the city and were counting down to the precise second of John Paul’s death. The city was divided into seven zones, each assigned a different colour of the rainbow. Greg was currently in the red zone. The streets were painted red, along with many of the buildings. There were red flags, and huge red drapes hanging down from buildings. People in the zone were creating red costumes and red floats for the festival. All across London, parades were

planned. It was going to be the party to beat them all. Gargantuan beer tents were being erected in public parks, and all the beer would be free. There would be cannabis tents too.

A song to celebrate John Paul's life was to be chosen and blasted out across the city. One crazy rumour was that the 'love' drug oxytocin, the chemical that promoted bonding and intimacy, would be sprayed into the air to bring Londoners closer together than ever before.

There was one other crazy rumour that Greg chanced upon on the internet.

'Are the dead walking the earth?' a random article proclaimed. It said that credible witnesses had sighted John Galt in London on two separate occasions. 'The rich just won't lie down, will they? We always suspected the rich were the undead. It's time to send out the vampire hunters. Start sharpening your stakes!'

Greg hadn't laughed at the article. Instead, two things flashed through his mind. What if John Galt had an identical twin? And if the LLN didn't kill Galt, who did? The Midas Murderer? Who on earth was that?

54

Greg was at home, watching a documentary. Two retired generals were enthusing about Napoleon's tactics at Austerlitz, his brilliant use of rapid manoeuvring and tactical deception.

Greg recalled one of the things Galt relished saying about Napoleon: 'He was the master of deceiving the enemy.' Did Galt somehow deceive the LLN? Maybe he wasn't dead at all. No, the police had confirmed his death, hadn't they? The results of the DNA tests on his corpse were unambiguous. But what about the identical twin idea? A nagging feeling that something was wrong wouldn't go away.

Greg jotted down several words on a piece of paper: John Galt, Fountainhead Tower, Napoleon, Austerlitz, Deception. He typed them into Google to see if anything came up. A name flashed up – Ayn Rand. Greg looked her up on Wikipedia and was astonished by what he found. Rand was an author and philosopher from a privileged background who left Soviet Russia in 1926 and found a new home in America. Her two most famous books were *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. The first was about a brilliant architect overcoming the fierce resistance of petty and envious bureaucrats. *Atlas Shrugged* told the story of the richest people in America going on strike in protest at the ever-growing state interference in their lives and businesses. Their strike brought the nation to its knees and showed, according to Rand, how indispensable entrepreneurs, business bosses, bankers and industrialists were to the health of the country. Then came the final revelation – the fictional hero of *Atlas Shrugged*, the brilliant and

charismatic organiser of the strike, with the avowed aim of ‘stopping the motor of the world’, was...John Galt.

Over the years, Rand’s fictional hero became the god of big business, hero of all entrepreneurs, financiers and industrialists, poster boy of unrestrained capitalism, of unregulated free markets and minimal state interference. He was the essence of everything the LLN opposed. If Rand’s Galt had existed, he would have been the precise equivalent of...John Galt, multi-billionaire, founder and head of Global Enterprise Solutions. The fictional Galt vanished at the start of *Atlas Shrugged* and pulled the strings of the strike from a secret mountain retreat in the remote mountains of Colorado. Throughout the novel, many people weren’t sure if he really existed or was just a myth. Over and over, the question was asked, ‘Who is John Galt?’

Greg’s mind lit up. There was no such person as John Galt, head of Global Enterprise Solutions, was there? He was a fiction, like the hero of *Atlas Shrugged*. Perhaps the man who had played the part was the front man of an ultra-capitalist secret organisation. Maybe he was an unemployed actor too, exactly like those used by the LLN. Jesus, had the LLN been fighting a covert war with Global Enterprise Solutions, with both sides using actors? In that case, who were the real people, the controllers behind the scenes, the men behind the curtain? Maybe this was what Lucinda was hinting at last time they met.

And there was something else. If John Galt never really existed, maybe he never really died.

55

It was 27 February, the anniversary of John Paul’s assassination. Greg had such a strange feeling. He stared into a mirror. Can you see yourself in a mirror, *really* see yourself? Or is it just a surface reflection that gazes back, a veneer, a mask? His true self, Greg knew, was a coward. There was no point in denying it any longer. Even in this new world, he was holding back. He couldn’t blame the super rich, celebrities or anyone else. He was always waiting for others to make the moves. The last man was alive and well and his name was Greg Raslow.

‘I’m confessing my deepest secret to you,’ he said to his reflection. ‘I’m scared.’ He imagined his reflection asking him what he was afraid of, and there was only one answer to that – life itself. He couldn’t make it do what he wanted. He was always letting it pass him by, making no attempt to grab it and compel it to obey his will. Lucinda was right. She had seen through him – the ultimate invisible man. But today that was going to change. Your life is what you’re prepared to settle for. Most people settle for second best. That’s what he’d done. But not anymore. Just do it, he thought. Go out and grab life.

Today he would become visible. The next time he looked in the mirror he would see his real self.

He left his apartment and hurried to the Tube. He was heading for the station closest to Fountainhead Tower. Something big would happen there today, he was certain of it. Anniversaries always reveal secrets, and Fountainhead Tower was the most secret place Greg knew.

The Tube trains were already full of boisterous people getting ready to party. The Meritocratic government had promised a Dionysian celebration to commemorate John Paul's life. At 2 pm they would start the festival with the special song they'd chosen for the occasion.

Leaving the Tube station, Greg found himself in a bustling crowd of thousands. Marshals in high visibility jackets were distributing fake banknotes with the ex-monarch's face replaced by those of ordinary people. Greg couldn't help laughing.

Screens positioned on prominent buildings showed iconic clips from landmark movies: inspirational scenes of the people's uprising in *Metropolis*, the moment when the magic tree started ringing in *The Singing, Ringing Tree*, the steamship being hauled over a mountain in *Fitzcarraldo* and then going down the rapids while the Great Caruso's voice boomed out on record, the three men entering the Zone in *Stalker*, uplifting opera being played to the prisoners in the *Shawshank Redemption*.

Flyers were scattered from the tops of every building other than Fountainhead Tower. They floated to the ground like carefree butterflies. People were laughing and reaching up to pluck them from the air. Greg picked up one from the street. It said:

Are you leading the best life of which you are capable?

The Five Tests

Are you about to take a big decision? How do you know it's the right one? Here are the five tests:

1. **The Eternal Recurrence Test** – this thing you are about to do: if you had to watch yourself performing this action an infinite number of times, would you still go ahead? If so, do it. If not, don't.

2. **The Movie Of Your Life Test** – this thing you are about to do: would you want it to be in the movie of your life, the scenes that show you at your very best? If so, do it. If not, don't.

3. **The Gravestone Test** – this thing you are about to do: would you want it recorded on your gravestone after your death? If so, do it. If not, don't.

4. **The Mirror Test** – this thing you are about to do: will you be able to look at yourself in the mirror afterwards and feel proud of what you have done? If so, do it. If not, don't.

5. **The Others Test** – this thing you are about to do: will you be happy for others to know all about it? If so, do it. If not, don't.

If you obey these five tests, you will never perform any acts of which you are ashamed. You will never lie and cheat, you will never be a slave to others and you will never do anything unworthy. You will take pride in everything you do. You will be happy for others to know about your life. Your life will be the best it can be. It will be your personal masterpiece, sculpted by you to perfection.

In fact, there is really only one test: Eternal Recurrence. Are you proud enough of the thing you are about to do to wish it to be repeated endlessly? If so, you will be delighted for it to be in the movie of your life, you will be proud to have it recorded on your gravestone, you will be thrilled to look at yourself in the mirror afterwards, and you will be eager for the whole world to know what you have done. You will have complete self-respect and you will command the respect of everyone who knows you. You will be a person who has lived life absolutely on your own terms.

Other tests – those of religion, the laws of your society, the expectations of family and friends – are irrelevant. The Last Judgment is not when God pronounces his sentence on you, it's when, at the last moment of your life, you pronounce judgment on yourself.

Greg stared at the words. They were so powerful. Imagine a life designed with eternal repetition in mind. How glorious would it have to be to endure endless re-examination? It would indeed have to be the best life of which anyone was capable.

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Greg reached Fountainhead Tower and noticed the usual heavy security presence outside the business entrance. He hurried into the public courtyard, almost skidding on the polished cobbles. Then he stopped, shocked. In the centre was an enormous Art Deco silver sculpture of the mythical giant Atlas, holding the world, inscribed with a map of the earth, on his shoulders. Greg instantly thought of Ayn Rand's book. If Atlas ever did shrug, the world would fall off its perch. And who was Atlas? Global Enterprise Solutions' boss, John Galt, perhaps? But he was dead, and the world hadn't fallen off its axis.

Greg had a weird feeling that his life was being controlled by that sculpture, by what it represented. A swarm of school kids swept past him, en route to the art gallery. Two teachers struggled to keep them in line. Greg joined them in the gallery and spent a few minutes digesting Galt's taste in

art – the usual gimmicky conceptual art favoured by rich patrons.

In one corner, a sign over a black door said, *Restricted Access: Authorised Personnel Only*. Where did it lead? Greg wanted to do something bold, to break out of his usual passivity. While the attendants were distracted with the kids, he pushed the door open and entered a long corridor with a fire door at the far end. *No Unauthorised Entry* said a sign above it. A CCTV camera pointed down into the corridor. Greg walked to the fire door and tried to force it open, but it refused to budge. It seemingly needed a security swipe card to open it. He stood there, rubbing his head in frustration. Then it simply opened. He was startled when he saw who was behind it.

‘You shouldn’t have come here.’ Lucinda was dressed in a sober charcoal business suit and looked like a high-powered corporate female. She was clutching a walkie-talkie in her hand.

‘What the hell?’ Greg spluttered.

‘You should leave. Please, don’t cause any trouble. It was lucky I saw you on the monitor. If the security guards catch you, the police will be here. They don’t like trespassers.’

‘What’s going on, Lucinda? I need to know why this place is so different.’

‘I didn’t want you to get involved with any of this.’

‘I’m not going anywhere until I’ve had some answers.’

‘I’m telling you, forget it – forget this place, forget me. Just go home and have a happy life.’

‘I told you, I need answers.’

‘You won’t get them here.’

Lucinda’s walkie-talkie crackled into life. Greg heard a man’s voice. ‘Let him pass.’

‘No, leave him out of it.’ Lucinda raised her voice. ‘Let him go.’

‘He wants the answers,’ the voice said.

Lucinda turned and beckoned to Greg to follow her then led him through a labyrinth of deserted corridors until she reached a red door.

‘He’s in there.’

‘Who is?’

‘Who do you think? The real leader of the LLN.’

Greg stared at her, baffled.

Lucinda turned and started to head back down the corridor. ‘You wanted the answers,’ she said as she walked. ‘Believe me, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.’

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Greg took a deep breath and opened the door. He took a few steps then froze, open-mouthed. He was in a vast room with endless shelves. They

all contained the same thing: row upon row of small, tawdry, plaster statues of John Paul. Instantly enraged, he snatched a fire extinguisher from a wall and started smashing the statues to pieces.

‘Smash as many as you like,’ a voice said. ‘My production line can make another ten thousand in under an hour.’

Greg spun round, stunned. ‘You!’

‘That’s right.’ John Galt smiled. ‘Me.’

‘But they found your body.’

‘Did they?’ Galt held up his left hand. His little finger was missing. ‘They certainly got a good sample of my DNA, didn’t they?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I chopped it off myself and sent it to the police.’

‘But the body they found didn’t have a little finger either.’

‘I know.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘The body they thought was mine belonged to a vagrant. He died of exposure. He looked a bit like me, had the same sort of height and build, and was about my age. I knew he might come in useful so I arranged for him to be put on ice. When the time came, we cut off his finger, disfigured him and burned his corpse.’

‘But they did DNA tests on the corpse.’

‘No, they were given a second sample from my severed finger.’ He winked. ‘The police investigators were all on my payroll.’

‘So why did you cut off your finger? It doesn’t make any sense. Your police friends would have said whatever you wanted them to say.’

Galt held up his hand again. ‘I did it to show I could. There’s only one question in life – how much do you want it?’ He stared at the stump of his little finger. ‘This is what it takes. This is how determined I am to succeed. Can you imagine taking a chopper and cutting off your own finger? Can you imagine the will it takes?’

‘You’re nuts.’

‘I showed you my model of the Battle of Austerlitz. You should have known that fooling the enemy was what I admired most about Napoleon.’

‘I thought you were a megalomaniac then, and nothing’s changed.’

‘Don’t be tedious. “Megalomaniac” is just another word for leader. Aleister Crowley said there should be only one Commandment: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” That’s what people like me believe. We’re strong enough to be our own law. Are you?’

Greg didn’t answer. Galt’s fake corpse had those strange symbols engraved on them, the same as on the corpses of the four dead billionaires. That meant...

‘You kidnapped and killed the other billionaires, didn’t you?’

‘Naturally.’

‘And that weird machine that inscribed symbols on their backs and

chests...that was yours.'

'Yes.'

'But why?'

'Those men were rivals of mine. I once belonged to an organisation that, to be frank with you, controlled the world. If I wanted to succeed with my plan, I had to destroy its power. Luckily they gave me the names and addresses of every member. I mean how stupid can you get? I took the opportunity to eliminate the four men who posed the greatest threat to me.'

Greg was incredulous.

'Come on, you have to admire me,' Galt said. 'Don't you think it's miraculous what I've achieved?'

'You mean faking your own death? That's hardly novel. Or killing your rivals? That's not a surprise either. You people are capable of anything.'

'No, I'm referring to my little toy – the LLN.'

'What are you talking about? You were the person the LLN most hated, and you hated them too.'

'Genius, isn't it? My very own Austerlitz. Now I know what it feels like to be Napoleon.'

Greg stood there, bewildered.

'Have you any idea how fragile genius is?' Galt said. 'When Napoleon was rising through the ranks, his talent could easily have got him killed. In fact it almost did. Luck saved him. We all need a bit of luck. And those amongst us who are great men in the making often need a revolution to help us become what we truly are.'

'Why would you need a revolution? You were already the world's richest man.'

'But I wanted more. Napoleon took the imperial crown from the Pope's hands, placed it on his own head and pronounced himself emperor. That's the supreme act of a self-made man. He requires no authority or approval from anyone else. He creates himself. I wanted to go one better than Napoleon. I wanted to make myself ruler of everything. Can you even begin to imagine the scale of the challenge, the amount of vision required? To achieve it I had to create my own shadow, something that would oppose everything that people like me stand for. It would sweep away everyone like me, but I myself would endure.'

'What are you saying? That the LLN work for you?'

'Yes.' Galt smiled. 'Not knowingly, of course. Actually, that's not true.'

'What do you mean?'

Galt glanced at his watch. 'You've come on an auspicious day, when I say goodbye to the real leader of the LLN.'

'I'm not following. I thought you were claiming to be the LLN's leader.'

'He'll be here soon, the man who came up with the whole scheme. I thought he was insane when he first came to me with his plan. I would never have agreed to meet him if it hadn't been for the fact that...' Galt stopped.

‘What is it?’

‘Oh, I won’t spoil the surprise. Let me just say that you’ve already met him. He followed your progress with interest. Actually, he knew what practically everyone in the LLN was up to. As I say, he has an incredible brain. Combine that with a dazzling memory, an astonishing gift for understanding and tracking the minutest details, and you have a genius on your hands. In his own way, he’s a Napoleon too, except for his one glaring weakness: he has no charisma. What a tragedy. All the gifts except being able to command the respect of others. And without that you’re lost.’

‘You’re saying I know the leader of the LLN. That I’ve met him?’

‘Certainly. But you wouldn’t have realised it. No one does. That’s the brilliant part of it. This person is the last one you’d suspect.’

Greg couldn’t think of a single likely candidate. There was no way he could have met this person. Galt must be mistaken.

‘You know that my favourite song is Bowie’s *The Man Who Sold the World*,’ Galt said. ‘I guess you could say that this person did just that. He sold it to me.’

‘I don’t understand. The LLN overthrew the rich and famous. It’s been a year since they won.’

Galt laughed. ‘The illusion of winning isn’t the same as victory. This is the ultimate bear market as far as the rich and famous are concerned. Our stock has never been so low. We’ve all been squeezed out of the market. Or rather, all bar one. Unlike everyone else, I’ve been enjoying the ultimate bull market. You probably haven’t noticed that stock markets still exist. Wall Street and the City are dead, but small stock markets still exist everywhere. If you looked hard enough, you’d discover something astonishing. Holding companies owned by me control every large corporation, company and enterprise on earth. I own the whole corporate world. I bought it all for a few pennies, so to speak. Distressed owners had no choice but to sell to me. While all the LLN broo ha ha was going on, I was secretly going around hoovering up everything at bargain-basement prices. Of course, no one knew they were selling to me. They thought I was dead.’

Greg felt as though someone had grabbed his neck and plunged his head into a pool of icy water. The LLN, he now realised, was nothing but a Trojan horse, the perfect false flag operation. Ordinary people had embraced it as their saviour, and now, it seemed, it was their worst enemy. Behind it stood the richest, most ruthless and cynical man on earth. Galt had used it to attack his business enemies, to take everything they had. All he had to do was defeat 6,000 people – the global elite the LLN spoke of. A realistic number for one man to beat, especially if he knew inside out the system that brought them to dominance. It was the most brilliant hostile takeover in history. A classic Napoleonic deception.

‘The penny’s beginning to drop, isn’t it?’

Greg believed Galt, believed him utterly. If Galt controlled both the LLN

and the remnants of the corporate world then he controlled *everything*. One man had done it. One man had become master of the earth, king of the world.

‘You can see the scale of it, the breadth of my ambition, can’t you? Dizzying, isn’t it? History bows before me. Every tyrant, every dictator, every emperor, king, president, pope, prime minister, warlord...they all pale into insignificance beside me. I’ve trumped them all. John Galt is the greatest figure in history.’

‘But that’s not your name. John Galt is a fictional character in a book by Ayn Rand.’

Galt laughed. ‘That *is* my name. What motions must the stars have gone through to ensure that I was born with the name of my greatest fictional hero? When fate marks you in that way, you know it has promised to give you everything you ever wanted.’

Greg was struggling to speak. ‘You knew who I was right from the beginning, didn’t you?’

‘Of course. That’s why I helped you so much on the Golden Barge.’

‘And that’s why you didn’t show the pictures of me with John Paul?’

‘Yes.’

Greg put his hand over his mouth. He felt sick.

Galt glanced at his watch again. ‘He’s late. That’s most unlike him.’ He pointed at the rows of shelves. ‘Irony, huh? I’m going to create a cult of John Paul. Well, it already exists, of course. The LLN was guaranteed to fail because its visible leader was certain to become everything it opposed: a celebrity. I’m going to see to it that John Paul is given his due. This room containing countless cheap and tacky statues of him is just the start of it. I’ll make him immortal, a god, and earn loads of money from his image rights – which I own, of course. It’s what he would have wanted. You shouldn’t believe all that nonsense about what his last words were. He didn’t say, “We’re all nobodies.” His dying words were, “*I was somebody*.”’

Greg looked away in horror. He had no doubt Galt was telling the truth. John Paul had bought into his own myth. It was always on the cards. With his dying words, he undid everything the LLN stood for.

‘Oh, why so glum?’ Galt asked. ‘Aren’t you going to make a move on Lucinda and live happily ever after?’

‘What?’

Galt gave another smarmy smile. ‘You don’t know much about women, do you? She was very keen on you. If only you’d asserted yourself more. She expects men to make the moves. Very old-fashioned, but she’s that kind of girl.’

‘You’re crazy. She hates me.’

‘Come off it, she has the biggest soft spot for you. She was my PA once. We were very close. A highly capable young lady. I arranged that job with Dosh and Rex for her to raise her profile. And then you came along and she

started to change. You made her feel guilty. She started talking about integrity. She became such a bore.'

Greg didn't know what to say. A knock on the door startled him.

'Come in,' Galt said.

The door opened and a shaven headed young guy came in. Wearing jeans, a white T-shirt and an old camouflage army jacket, he was utterly nondescript: average height, average looks, average clothes. Mr Average incarnate.

'At last,' Galt said. 'Well, Greg, let me introduce you to the genius behind the LLN. He may well be the smartest man who ever lived. Apart from me, of course.'

Greg stared at the guy and then at Galt. 'I thought you said I'd met him.' He shook his head. 'I've never seen him before in my life.'

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Galt laughed. 'I don't blame you. No one ever remembers him and he wouldn't have it any other way. He's like a spy. It makes his work easier. Anyway, who says genius should be obvious?'

'We have met,' the 'genius' said in a soft, accentless voice. 'The day you came to the LLN's HQ.'

'No, I remember that day vividly. You weren't there.'

'But I was.'

Greg shook his head. 'Well, who were you? What did you do?'

The genius stared straight at him. 'I was the guy who shined your shoes.'

A sickening shudder passed through Greg.

'No one ever notices the man who shines their shoes,' the genius said. 'It's too embarrassing. Hence the perfect way to be invisible. Public toilet cleaners are the same. When the police came and arrested everyone at the LLN HQ, it was only as an afterthought that they arrested the cleaners and me. They barely noticed us. They assumed it was impossible that we could have played any part. They released us almost immediately.'

'Is that why you chose to be the shoeshiner? The anonymity?'

'I wasn't really shining shoes. I was studying people. I remember your scuffed shoes. I remember you were the only one who said thank you.'

Greg stared at the floor. That day in the HQ, the shoe shiner had disgusted him in a way he'd never fully understood. He reluctantly glanced up again.

'You're looking at me strangely,' the genius said. 'You can't take it in, even now. Your prejudice tells you it's impossible that a shoeshiner is the brains behind the scenes. How can a shoeshiner have outsmarted you? Well, I studied philosophy at Glasgow University and got a First. Then I did a PhD at Cambridge University, specialising in the Situationist International, Dada,

semiotics and hyperreality. My thesis was about how a zeitgeist is just a narrative devised by the most powerful people in a social group. Anyone who wants to overthrow the zeitgeist has to use the same narrative, but inverted. My thesis was called *The Iconic Destruction of the Spectacular Society through Hyperreal Maleficence*. I only just scraped my PhD. My supervisor thought I was playing some sort of intellectual joke that he couldn't get. The external examiners who came to do my viva voce were just as bemused. They didn't ask too many questions. They said my research was interesting but they couldn't see any practical applications. In the thesis, I didn't specify precise plans, only the general strategy and some of the tactics that might be employed. I think those three were the only people who ever read it. That's the fate of most of the world's key texts. Of course, it would have been a best seller if Dosh had stuck her name on it. Now that would have been hyperreal maleficence at its very best, or perhaps I mean worst.'

'How did you meet him?' Greg glanced at Galt who was wearing an insufferable smirk.

'The same way I meet everyone. I shined his shoes.'

'You really were a shoeshiner? It wasn't just an act?'

'I shined thousands of shoes. I even shined Rex's shoes. I told him about one of my main ideas, my Movie Theory of Life. I bet he didn't remember me.'

'He remembered your theory, but not you.'

'Par for the course. Anyway, what was his movie like?'

'I didn't like it.'

'Too many gaudy highlights, I'm sure. Boring action sequences. A poor script, no structure, no emotional depth, no philosophy. A complete lack of an aesthetic.'

'Something like that.'

'It's always something like that. I mean who'd ever want to watch a movie about a rich cunt?' The genius turned and glared at Galt.

'But why didn't you get a better job?' Greg asked. 'Someone as smart as you – they must have been queuing to employ you.'

The genius laughed with pure derision. 'Are you kidding? Who wants a philosopher of hyperreality in their office? Sophocles said, "How terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise." I was much smarter than everyone who interviewed me. I didn't bother concealing it. Why should I? Nor did I bother concealing my contempt for them. I always made it clear that they were pawns in a game and one day I would destroy that game and take everything from them, every shred of their self-inflated status.'

'I can see why that didn't work,' Greg said sarcastically.

'How many people can say they've lived their lives on their own terms?' the genius said. 'I never compromised once. I didn't brown nose anyone, didn't lick any arse. I preferred, like Oscar Wilde, to lie in the gutter, staring at the stars.'

‘But you were bitter as hell. You still are.’

‘I was in the shittiest movie ever. There I was, peering down at thousands of shoes covered with crap. The underside of life in every way. But I made the most of it. I tried to see dirt in the most positive way. It begins to have a certain beauty after a while. It’s where the action is. Real life. Not the gloss we use to hide everything, not the celebrity perfection, the anodyne, sterilised world of the super rich. But for the movie to be any good, there has to be redemption. There must be a dynamic. The story has to open out, show you something else. There have to be ups and downs. I endured the downs. Where was the up? And where was the theme? I always knew mine: *revenge*. It’s the greatest of all thirsts to slake. I couldn’t have my vengeance if I were in any position of cosy respectability. To really get life, to really go for it, you must have nothing to lose. Only then can you gain everything.’

‘Come on,’ Galt said, ‘let’s go up to the observation platform.’ As he was leading them towards the elevator, his mobile phone rang. It was the ultimate in bling – white gold studded with diamonds. ‘Excuse me,’ Galt said after a moment, ‘I have to take this. It’s the Swiss bank regarding our special arrangement.’ He winked at the genius then stepped into a private room with large glass windows.

Greg noticed a look in the genius’s eyes as he gazed through the glass at Galt. He couldn’t help being shocked. It was a look of undisguised loathing.

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‘There’s something I need to clear up,’ Greg said to the genius while Galt was taking his call. ‘What was my role in the LLN? I was never asked to do anything.’

‘We had loads of people in a similar position. We didn’t need them as it turned out. In your case, the idea was that you would get access to Rex’s secret room and steal his film. We planned to put it on TV and show the world what these people are really like. We weren’t sure what was on it, but we guessed it would be nauseating.’

‘How did you know about Rex’s room and his film?’

‘He mentioned it to Galt.’

‘Someone broke into his room. You?’

‘My people, yes. They didn’t think they could get in, but they managed it. That’s why we didn’t need you anymore. My guys made a copy of his film but I couldn’t be bothered watching it, and we didn’t bother showing it. Things were already going our way.’

‘And it was you who switched off all the lights in Enterprise Tower?’

‘An undetectable computer virus. I wrote it myself.’

‘Where did Chloe fit into your scheme?’

‘Same place as you. She was there to create bizarre sexual sculptures of

Dosh and Rex that we would then show to the public to reveal the obscene self-love of these monsters, but we didn't need to go through with it.'

'It was you who informed on me, wasn't it?'

The genius nodded. 'I wanted Dosh and Rex to know that we could get to them, no matter where they were or how they protected themselves. I wanted every rich and famous person to know they could never escape us.'

'So, I was completely disposable?'

'You signed up to the LLN. We didn't ask anything of you. How can you complain? You didn't come to any harm. You had the experience of a lifetime. That was all thanks to the LLN.'

'And what about Chloe?'

'What about her? She liked the rich and famous too much. Now she can share their fate.' The genius ran his hand over his shaved head. 'It's over and done with.'

They stood in silence for a few moments. Greg wasn't sure if he hated the genius or admired him.

'Do you remember the magic mirror in the Snow Queen?' the genius asked.

'The fairytale?' Greg found it unnerving the way the genius looked at him. It was so intense.

'Yes, the Hans Andersen story. It was one of my favourites. The mirror in that fairytale was the most amazing thing. Everything good and beautiful that appeared in it shrivelled up and vanished, while the bad and ugly things got bigger. Everything was distorted and grotesque. And the mirror sneered whenever a holy and moral thought passed through anyone's mind. The mirror was carried all over the world by demons and they loved showing people the repellent world it revealed.

'That mirror got me thinking. I thought of alternative mirrors. Above all, I thought of the Celebrity Mirror. In this mirror, everything worthwhile and good vanishes or becomes ugly while everything tacky and vulgar is given a veneer of beauty and massively magnified. In the Celebrity Mirror, the worst aspects of our society are made gorgeous. They're all you can see. Nice, normal, hard-working people disappear while selfish and loathsome people become as radiant as gods. Then there's the Mirror of the Spectacle. In this mirror, only spectacular events appear. Everything else is invisible. The spectacle is all that matters. As for the Advertising Mirror, it takes everything complex and turns it into simplistic nonsense. Everything gets transformed into a moronic brand. If it can't be branded, it ceases to exist. Those were the only mirrors that we got in society before the LLN showed up. We can never go back.'

'But that's exactly where we'll be going if Galt has his way.'

The genius raised his eyebrows. 'You know, the moment my life changed was when I realised that everything can be reduced to two things: narrative and images – *movies*. Each of us is the star of a movie called our

life. It's the one we're in 24/7 and we're always at the centre of the action. Most of our personal movies are rubbish...just like the real movie industry. Some are good, a few awesome, but they are the rare exceptions amongst the endless dross.

'For most of us, our movies ought to be so much better than the tedious junk we churn out. We show the audience our dreary lives in the dreary little square boxes that we call houses that we've bought for a fortune because someone told us it was important to own property; our dreary nights out in dreary clubs listening to music we hate, our dreary conversations in dreary bars with dreary friends we don't actually like; our dreary jobs where we do dreary things and kowtow to deadhead managers we secretly despise but don't have the guts to say so to their faces; our dreary commute to our dreary working prisons where we try our utmost to do nothing; our dreary complaints about how dreary our lives are, and our complete failure to do anything about it.

'Let me give you a quick introduction to movie theory. It's not hard, and it might change your life. I'll give you the Hollywood treatment because it's the most familiar. When you're making a movie, the first thing you have to consider is the movie's opening and closing images. The two must be related, usually inversely. If my Hollywood hero is a pauper at the beginning, he should be rich by the end. If he's loveless in the first frame, he should be loved up by the last. If he's a coward to start off with, he'll be a hero by the end. Hollywood character arcs always take you from a negative state to a desirable one. A tragedy takes you in the opposite direction. You start off as somebody governed by ambition, say, and by the end ambition has destroyed you. *Macbeth*, for example.

'Opening and closing images frame our whole lives, like birth and death. But I'm really talking about the dynamic phase of our lives when we're making our way in the world. The opening image is when we're eighteen, say, and our closing image is when we're about fifty. We all have thirty-two years to get our closing image right, and hardly anyone succeeds. When we're on our deathbed, will we be proud of our closing image, or tormented by it? That's the challenge of the movie of our life. That's when we know if we're going to heaven or hell. That's the Final Judgment.

'We all have to strive to turn our story into a compelling narrative. Truth, quality, talent, intelligence, beauty: they're all secondary to narrative. A strong narrative contains cause and effect, laughter, tears, triumph and tragedy, the things that move people most. Truth isn't interesting to the average person, so it's ignored. Most people don't admire intelligence, so it's ignored. But everyone pays attention to narrative.'

Greg couldn't believe how fast and passionately the genius spoke. He kept jabbing his finger at Greg to emphasise every point.

'Here's another thing you have to be aware of: the difference between plot and story. Story's about your inner problem, the problem you're

grappling with at the start, sometimes referred to as your character flaw or emotional wound. Maybe you're a failure because you lack confidence. So, your inner problem is to overcome this. Because you lack confidence, you have a rotten job. You want a new, satisfying job. How do you get it? The movie will follow your attempts to get your new job. That's your movie's plot, and it's about your outer problem – the external manifestation of your inner problem. But the story, remember, is about how you overcome your lack of confidence. A good movie has a plot and story that work together. So, as you struggle to get this new dream job, you find yourself confronting all sorts of obstacles and setbacks that you have to defeat if you're going to succeed. You'll be tested to the limit. If you can triumph over all the problems, you'll start to realise that you're a much better, more determined, more capable person than you ever dreamt possible. All of that will boost your self-confidence, and because you now have much more self-confidence you'll get your perfect job. So you've solved your outer problem – getting the fabulous new job – and you've done it by solving your inner problem; overcoming your lack of self-confidence. The connections between plot and story, inner and outer problems, are the key to good movie making. If plot and story aren't well matched, the movie is hopeless, completely unengaging. Plot is a physical journey and story is an emotional journey. You have to make the two journeys work in tandem.

'By the end of a Hollywood story, the character flaw is remedied, the emotional wound healed. If only our real lives were like that. But most of us are in shit movies. We never understand ourselves, we never overcome our problems, our character flaws remain, our emotional wounds deepen and we never get what we want. Even those who do mostly get it through nothing but luck, by being in the right place at the right time, being born to the right parents in the right environment, inheriting good genes in the genetic lottery.

Greg shuddered as he listened. The genius might as well be pointing right at him. His character flaws were as bad as ever, his emotional wounds gaping. He hadn't gone on any journey. His 'character arc' was more like a flat line. He started out as Everyman and he was still Everyman. No happy ending. No resolution of plot or story. Well and truly stuck.

'Everyone's in the same boat,' the genius went on, 'trying to be as successful as possible in life, and the overwhelming majority fail. As Alexandre Dumas' son said, "If God were suddenly condemned to live the life which he has inflicted upon men, he would kill himself." But I prefer Thoreau's observation: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." That's the truth of it. The song we want to sing is locked inside us. There are no Hollywood endings for most of us. Why are we so seduced by Hollywood when it's so remote from our real lives? We're suckers, setting ourselves up for failure. If most of us want good closing images, we have to change society. If we must watch our life over and over again forever on the day we die then we need our own revolution,

starting from within. Or we'll be in hell. Hell is yourself. Or rather hell is watching your shit life being replayed for eternity. Everyone should place the movie of their life on an LCD screen built into the headstone of their grave, and set on an infinite loop. Then anyone who stops by the grave to look at your movie will soon know whether you've gone to heaven or hell.'

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Galt returned to the main room, carrying a silver briefcase. 'I've taken care of business,' he said. 'Have you two been having an interesting chat?'

Neither Greg nor the genius responded.

With his free hand, Galt held up his mobile phone and gazed admiringly at it. 'A thing of beauty, isn't it? Seventy thousand pounds. That's the price of quality. It's the diamonds I love most. Diamond is the hardest natural substance on earth. The ancient Greeks believed that diamonds were the tears of the gods. I like the idea of hard tears. It implies greater tragedy, don't you think?'

'Fake tears, you mean – all for show,' the genius said. 'Bling tears.'

Galt raised an eyebrow. 'Come on,' he said, 'I promised to take you up to my observation platform, or my invisible bridge as I prefer to call it.' He led them into the elevator and pressed the button for the top level. The doors closed and the elevator began a smooth ascent.

'There's something I don't get,' Greg said. 'Those symbols that were engraved on the bodies of the dead billionaires, what did they mean? What was the point if no one could decipher the symbols?'

Galt laughed. 'Oh, I suppose that illustrates what an unobservant world we live in. If people had looked carefully, they would have discovered that the symbols were the same as those that appeared in the Book of Eden.'

'It was all a scam, wasn't it?' Greg blurted. 'The Book of Eden must be fake since the corpses were marked before the book was ever found.'

The elevator stopped at its destination, but Galt reached over and pressed a button to prevent the doors from opening. 'Not necessarily,' he said, 'but I can see what you're getting at. Actually, the plan was to make the Midas Murderers seem like religious avengers visiting God's wrath upon the rich. The engraved symbols were all about God's hatred of the rich and greedy. The experts who translated the Eden Book were going to make the announcement. It would have created a frenzy. The implication was that a religious group existed that could trace its roots back to Eden. Like other plans, we didn't use it. That's life, isn't it? What was it John Lennon said? – "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."'

'But the experts authenticated the book,' Greg protested. 'That's what I don't get.'

Galt and the genius look at each other as though they were sharing a private joke.

‘Is the Book of Eden genuine or not?’

Galt laughed. ‘Of course it’s not. The Serpent device was fake too, but still the suckers swallowed it. Is there anything these people won’t swallow? You can tell them anything and billions will lap it up. Just so long as the narrative is exciting enough.’

‘The experts were certain, they...’

Galt guffawed. ‘Experts? You think these people are any different from anyone else? We filled their pockets with money, and we issued a threat or two about their career prospects, and, surprise, surprise, they had no hesitation in confirming what we wanted them to. We made sure no one else got to see the book up close, and we promised to destroy the evidence before anyone had a chance to discredit it. That’s about to be done in the next few days, actually. A mysterious fire, that kind of thing. An act of God.’ Galt chuckled then opened the elevator doors. Fresh air rushed into the elevator.

Greg needed it. His head was spinning.

They all stepped out onto the flat roof of Fountainhead Tower. Galt strode to the barrier at the edge of the roof, opened a gate and stepped through.

Greg watched, horrified, as Galt took a step right off the edge of the roof. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he screamed, but all he heard in response was Galt’s laughter. He realised there was a surface under Galt’s feet, spanning the courtyard to the opposite side of the tower.

‘My invisible bridge,’ Galt said with a grin. ‘Five million pounds it cost. It’s made from an incredibly tough and thin glass, invented by NASA. It’s impossible to see it from most angles. Fools nearly everyone. Don’t worry, it’s three metres wide, so there’s plenty of room, and there are marks on the roof to show where the bridge is.’

He beckoned to Greg and the genius to come and join him. ‘My bridge would never pass health and safety requirements, of course, but I never mention it to job’s worth people. This, literally, is for high fliers only.’ He breathed in hard, seeming to revel in being up here, so high above the people swarming around at ground level. ‘I tell you one thing,’ he said. ‘When businessmen who like playing hardball come out here, they rapidly become amenable to whatever terms I offer. This bridge has saved me a fortune.’

Greg gingerly edged his way onto the bridge, while the genius sauntered on, apparently unfazed.

Galt, judging by his gleaming eyes, was in his element. As for Greg, he was petrified, worrying that a strong breeze might catch him and blow him off the bridge.

‘Look down there at the courtyard,’ Galt said. ‘Isn’t the globe fantastic? I am Atlas now. The world rests on my shoulders.’ He gestured towards the nearby Thames and then the entire city. ‘Look out there. I own this city, lock

stock and barrel. Not individual houses. Who cares about those? But everything that matters: the big companies, the land, the jobs, the major facilities. All mine. And the same is true in every significant city on earth. I own this world. And it's all thanks to my genius here.' He tried to pat the genius on the shoulder, but the genius squirmed away.

'So, when he shined your shoes, he told you his plan about the LLN?' Greg asked, making his way off the bridge and back to the safety of the tower.

Galt shook his head. 'No. He spoke about the Battle of Waterloo, actually. He said it was odd the way history described it as a battle between Wellington's British and Napoleon's French, with Blucher's Prussians arriving at the end.'

'I don't understand. Isn't that right?'

'No,' the genius interjected. 'Wellington was the commanding general but most of his troops were Belgians, Dutch, Hanoverians and so on. Only a third of his army was British. It was actually a coalition army, but that gets ignored. A false narrative is created, and everyone believes it. The truth always loses out to narrative.'

'The human race is the story species. It lives and dies by stories. Why are maths, science and philosophy hated so much? – because they contain no simple stories and don't deal with emotions. Where are the emotions in atoms and molecules, numbers and equations? Where's the plot? Ordinary people can't understand non-stories. The human mind, for all its pretensions, is just a story processor. The more emotionally powerful the story the better. Truth doesn't get a look in. In fact things are believed to be true purely to the extent to which they form part of an emotionally compelling narrative. God exists because people love myths, and because the God myth speaks to humanity's ultimate weakness – fear of death.'

Galt smiled. 'Well, you can see why I took him seriously. You don't expect a shoeshine boy to talk like that. It was obvious he knew about me and my interest in all things Napoleonic. I asked him if he'd done research on me and he said yes. That impressed me. I asked him to come and see me in my office, and he accepted. That's when he revealed his LLN scheme. It blew me away. He had tied it in with the stock market and complex financial derivatives products. He showed me that the LLN narrative would start dictating the stock market narrative, and anyone who knew the timetable of events would make the ultimate stock market killing, and ramp up the profits by using leveraged derivatives escalators. I'd win both ways. I'd make ridiculous amounts of money, and I'd be able to buy priceless assets, the biggest companies on earth, for a pittance. For a while, corporate activity would go through a depression but then things would rebound to their previous lucrative level. But this time only one person would be in charge. *Me.*'

'And you couldn't resist?'

Galt laughed.

‘So, you’re admitting that the LLN works for you, that the whole thing is a sham, just a front for Global Enterprise Solutions?’

‘Yes, you could say that. The LLN introduced a new narrative that trumped the old narrative, but soon we’ll trump the LLN narrative once more. People have a deep craving for heroes, celebrities and the rich. The new Puritanism will wear off and then the LLN will fade away without a fuss and we’ll be back to the good old days. That’s right, genius, isn’t it?’

‘How much are you getting paid for betraying us?’ Greg asked the genius.

Galt slapped the genius on the shoulder. ‘Oh, he’s not greedy. One hundred million pounds was his price. I’ve just transferred ninety-nine million pounds electronically to a Swiss account, opened according to his precise specifications. The last million he wanted delivered in a briefcase...this one.’ He held up the silver briefcase.

‘So, what will you do with your Judas money?’ Greg asked.

‘Oh, that’s a bit strong, don’t you think?’ Galt said. ‘Anyway, he’s going to have some fun. He’ll catch up on all the things he’s missed out on. He never has to work again. He can spend the rest of his life thinking, solving every problem of human existence. Isn’t that right, genius?’

‘So, you’re the man who sold the world?’ Greg said to the genius. He was growing infuriated by the way the genius was just standing there, so unbothered.

‘And I’m the man who bought it.’ Galt laughed.

‘You don’t have any principles, do you?’ Greg said to the genius.

‘My life is my responsibility,’ he replied at last. ‘I’m not going to seek your approval, or anyone else’s.’

‘What’s your name?’ Greg asked.

The genius shook his head.

‘He’s the man with no name,’ Galt said. The Swiss Account I opened for him refers to him as Nobody – Mr Nobody of London. Mr Nobody can always come and work for me if he gets bored.’

‘How did you know you could trust him?’ Greg asked Galt.

‘Oh, I had forensic accountants pore over everything he did. There was no one way he was going to cheat me. Besides, I know my man – my philosopher isn’t interested in money. The hundred million is just a symbol. It won’t change his life because he lives in his mind.’ Galt smiled and handed over the silver case. ‘Well, we’re just about done.’

‘That’s right,’ the genius said, ‘you’ve been done.’

‘What did you say?’ Galt gave the genius an odd look.

‘Despite your forensic accountants, you’ve still been screwed.’

‘What?’

Greg sensed the sudden atmosphere. Something wasn’t right.

‘You never took any genuine interest in my ideas,’ the genius said. ‘That’s always a bad mistake.’

Galt nodded. 'Oh, you want to play a little game, do you? Well, I'm afraid you're the one who made a bad mistake. Money is the only thing that counts, and I have it all.' He stood there in the centre of his invisible bridge. 'This whole city belongs to me. The whole world. Who's going to listen to the king of the geeks?'

'There's one thing you overlooked,' the genius said.

'And what's that?'

'I'm not in your movie. You're in mine.'

Galt was baffled. 'What are you talking about?'

'You know what the funniest thing is,' the genius said, 'you never understood the LLN.'

'I understood perfectly. You came up with a brilliant scheme to destabilise the world owned by the rich and famous, devaluing their assets and allowing me to buy them up at bargain basement prices. You made a pile out of it, and I got what I wanted – control of the planet. I'm the first person to rule the world. I'm *Rex Mundi*, the king of the world.'

'You're the king of nothing. That's the final joke. You're the most deluded man in history.'

'Why are you saying these things?' Galt looked exasperated, his cool vanishing.

'Did you seriously think I'd use my brains to help a scumbag like you? You're everything I despise. I've spent my whole life trying to engineer the downfall of your sort – all the rich cunts, the celebrity morons, the famous jerks. "The unexamined life is not worth living," Socrates said, yet these people – the rich and famous – were the enshrinement of the unexamined life. They symbolised the life of vulgar materialism, the hatred of intelligent ideas, the worship of the gaudy and crass. And you...the clown prince, the leader of the empire of the deluded, the grand master of the magisterium of morons. You thought I'd use my intelligence in *your* service?'

'Look, I don't know what game you're playing, but...'

'Shut up,' the genius snapped. He opened the silver briefcase and took out a couple of wads of notes and stuffed them into the pockets of his army jacket. He gazed down into the courtyard. 'Maybe they should be playing *The Man Who Sold the World*. Strictly for the irony, of course.' He put down the briefcase, then took the wads of his cash from his pockets and emptied them into the breeze.

'What the hell are you doing?' Galt said. 'That's real money.'

'Money is the biggest illusion of all,' the genius said. 'We do nothing but worship the illusory. Humanity is the cult of the illusion.'

'Are you ill, is that it?'

'Ill?' the genius snorted. 'Because I don't worship money? You're such a sad man, and now you have only hell to look forward to. Hell for all eternity.'

'This is lunacy. You're scaring me.'

‘You ought to be scared. I’m the most frightening man you’ve ever met.’ The genius grinned in the most malevolent way. ‘*The End* by the Doors is the perfect music, I think. That’s the music we should be hearing on our journey to oblivion.’

‘I’ve heard enough of this nonsense. Our business is concluded. It’s over.’

‘I told you before – this is my movie.’

‘Don’t be stupid. I’m infinitely richer and more powerful than you. I didn’t want to say this, but you’ve left me no choice. You’re just a nobody, a pathetic, friendless non-entity. Your only companions are books because real people won’t talk to you. Who would want to spend more than a few minutes in the company of a tedious nerd like you? The world loves success, not failure.’

‘Nietzsche said, “Success has always been the greatest liar.”’

‘Fuck Nietzsche – another overbrained loser. For all his talk of the superman, he was timid, practically a hermit. All the brains in the world can’t save people like you from being losers. You know what a celebrity is? Someone others would like to be. Believe me, no one would like to be you. I’m glad I’ll never have to see you again.’

‘But you’re so wrong. You’ll be seeing me forever. We’re going to be locked together. You in despair, and I in triumph.’

‘Enough. This really is over.’

The genius held up his hand. ‘It’s over when I say so. It’s time you learned a few facts, time a few misconceptions were cleared up.’ He stared at the globe far below. ‘Your favourite painting is Goya’s *The Colossus*. You always thought the Colossus was Napoleon, but you’re wrong. The Colossus is actually protecting the Spanish village from Napoleon. The Colossus in Goya’s painting is a metaphor for the Spanish spirit of resistance. And there’s something else you ought to know. Goya didn’t paint it. It was one of the pupils in his studio.’

‘That’s nonsense.’

‘I know a lot about Colossus in all its guises. The Colossus they built at Bletchley Park in the Second World War was the world’s first electronic computer.’

‘I’m not interested.’

‘But you ought to be. You see, my codename is Colossus.’

‘What did you say?’

‘You heard me. I bugged my father’s office. He told you about me four years ago. I sent everyone in the Organisation a message that they had three years left. I made good on my word. Their three years was up last year. Yours was up too – you just didn’t know it.’

Galt stared at him in disbelief.

‘Oh, by the way my real name is Thomas Payne. Same name as the great revolutionary, but different spelling.’

‘You’re mad,’ Galt spluttered.

‘I beat your entire Organisation, Galt. I beat the so-called most powerful people on earth. So who’s mad now?’ Payne took a letter out of his pocket, placed it on top of the briefcase and kicked the briefcase over to Greg. He stared at Galt and Galt stared back.

‘What’s in that letter?’ Galt asked, panicking.

‘My philosophy,’ Payne answered. ‘It’s just two sentences long.’

Galt adjusted his collar. He was sweating heavily.

‘So, how do you like playing hard ball now?’ Payne asked.

Greg stood there, watching both men, trying to understand the subtext. Why didn’t Galt just leave the bridge? Why were both men standing there like gunslingers? He wondered what Payne had in mind. Was he going to tell Galt that he was finished and to clear out of the country? Would he announce to the world that Galt was the man behind the curtain, the Wizard of Oz?

‘Life’s just a movie,’ the genius said. ‘And some of us are in good ones and some in bad. Well, I think mine is the best there is. And this is how my movie ends.’

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Payne took a couple of steps forward and grabbed Galt. Galt screamed, but there wasn’t a sound from Payne. They grappled for a moment, but Galt was off balance. Both men tumbled over the edge of the glass bridge. Moments later there was a sickening thud.

Greg gazed down in horror. Galt’s body had landed on top of the silver globe, slap bang across North America. His bling gold bracelet and diamond ring were visible, glinting in the sun like emergency location beacons. Payne had fallen all the way to the courtyard and his body was sprawled over the cobbles, blood spreading around him.

Jesus fucking Christ!

61

Greg stood there for several moments, stunned. Staff from the art gallery came out. A woman screamed. Security guards appeared and started cordoning off the area. Some of them gazed upwards. Greg drew back from the edge before he was seen. The guards, he figured, would assume a terrible accident had occurred while Galt was showing his notoriously dangerous invisible bridge to a guest. There would be no questions. He picked up Payne’s envelope and briefcase then stumbled back into the elevator, thumping his hand against the ground floor button. The elevator lurched into motion, taking his stomach with it.

He gazed into the elevator’s mirror and barely recognised himself. He wanted to vomit, to scream. Yet he was aware of another sensation – he’d never felt more alive. He wanted to gorge on life, to bite it, to fuck it, to

bathe in its blood, to wrap himself in its entrails. Gore and glory. He wanted it all. He wanted such a visceral experience of life that he'd puke, haemorrhage, ejaculate, cry and shit all at once and then be bed-ridden for weeks as he recovered. How was that possible? How could he be so energised after seeing death so close up? Life, distilled and concentrated, was in his blood. If he looked at it under a microscope, he would see it a thousand times redder. Is that what the death of others does to you?

Greg remembered the sign he saw in the empty shop last year: *Dissatisfied?* Now he understood Payne's philosophy perfectly. By the end of the journey Payne had set in motion, everyone would want to live their life over and over again, forever. No one would be dissatisfied. Bling World was over, and the last Bling King dead, his corpse resting on top of a fake world held up by a myth.

Greg went back into the hangar-sized room full of those gaudy statues of John Paul, ten thousand plaster Messiahs, the junk memorabilia of capitalism. Galt had wanted to turn John Paul's death into a massive moneymaking enterprise. He wanted celebrity worship to start all over again, and under him it would have been worse than ever. Greg hated that room and those statues. When he heard some children's voices coming from the courtyard outside, he rushed to the end of the room and kicked open the fire door. An ambulance was there in the courtyard, and the kids were being evacuated from the art gallery.

'Through this way,' he yelled, beckoning to the kids. They obediently piled into the room. Their teachers tried to follow them, but Greg slammed the door shut.

'Smash it up!' he shouted to the kids, holding his arms wide open. 'Everything.'

The kids stared at him as though he'd gone insane.

'What are you waiting for? Smash it up – the whole room!'

Still nothing. Greg thought a few of the children were about to burst into tears. 'You won't get into trouble,' he said, 'I promise.'

All it takes is one. A thin, pale kid tentatively reached for the nearest statue. He gripped it, glanced around with exaggerated innocence, then let it drop as if by accident. It smashed on the ground with a satisfying detonation. He did it again, more assertively.

'Yes,' Greg shouted, 'that's it. Wreck them all. Smash every last one.'

The boy grabbed another of the statues and, with a whoop of delight, hurled it against a wall. And that was that. Everyone followed the leader. All the kids joined in. They ran round the room, a pack of jackals, destruction raised to the power of art. Dust billowed everywhere. The kids destroyed every statue. And Greg couldn't stop laughing.

He opened the doors and let in the children's teachers. They were furious, accusing him of abduction and saying the police were on their way. Greg opened his briefcase and thrust a couple of massive wads of notes at

them. 'Take those. Consider it a donation to your school for all the inconvenience.'

The teachers gazed at him, nonplussed. Then they looked past him at the arena of destruction. 'What the...' they said in unison.

'I take full responsibility for all of this,' Greg said. 'I promise there won't be any repercussions.'

The teachers peered at Greg then quickly ushered the schoolchildren back outside. He watched them go, amused. Standing there amongst the clouds of dust, he wondered what to do next. He hesitated for a moment then opened Payne's envelope. There were two items inside. One was a handwritten piece of paper and the other a small card. The paper said, 'For the attention of the leaders of the Meritocracy Party and the LLN. The tyrant is dead. Nothing is holding us back any longer. Remove the brakes. Implement our full programme. Change the world. Long live the people!'

Greg took a moment to absorb the words fully. Now he understood why the Meritocracy Party had been holding back in certain areas – they couldn't act why Galt was still able to interfere. Now that obstacle was gone for good. He wiped a tear from his eye. First John Paul and now Thomas Payne. Why are all the best ones taken young? He shoved the letter into his pocket.

As for the card, it contained just two lines.

**That was how my movie ended.
How will yours?**

Greg swallowed hard. Now he knew what the movie of a genius looked like. Payne had used his brains to manipulate the world's most powerful man. He really was the man who sold the world, yet he'd saved it too. He'd changed everything, changed it forever. Then, at the moment of his victory, when things couldn't get any better, he ended it. His was the ultimate closing image. And he took the most hated man alive with him, condemning Galt to the hell he deserved.

Greg tried to imagine Galt and Payne toppling through the air together. What were they thinking? Was Galt insane with fear, sick, disbelieving? Every dream was being wrenched from him. As for Payne, his dream was taking the precise shape he planned. How could anyone top that? Soaring, flying, plunging. The end coming to greet him. The speed. The wind in his hair, his body electrified. He chose the moment, the manner, the place. The ultimate leap of faith. Playing *The End* by *The Doors* in his head. An inevitable force. An inexorable end. The excitement. And, at the same time, he destroyed the ultimate cancer – the rich, the famous, the powerful, those who thought they deserved better than everyone else. The John Galt of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* was so arrogant he believed the super rich were propping up the world. Payne proved the opposite: the ordinary people were Atlas, and the super rich were nothing without them.

In a way, Payne must have been the bitterest man on earth – so much talent and yet passed over by a society that worshipped shopping and celebrity. He took his revenge in one devastating gesture. No right of reply. No weasel words. No pleading. The purity of death, its finality, like the Guillotine blade dropping. Unstoppable. Clean. Clinical. Terminal. No court of appeal. Sentence passed and executed. Would he watch that moment over and over again from some eternal viewing position? Would he take wondrous pleasure from annihilating the enemy once and for all? Samson, his strength restored for one divine moment of revenge, bringing down the temple on the heads of the Philistines. They laughed and mocked him. They blinded him, humiliated him, laughed in his face. But they stopped laughing when they realised the temple was about to crash down on them. Payne would watch his movie for eternity, with a permanent smile on his face.

What about my own movie? Greg thought. How will it end? What music will I choose? And he thought of something else. The worst thing anyone can say is, ‘I don’t like my movie...I want to watch yours instead.’ That’s what ordinary people used to say to celebrities in the old days.

You might as well be dead.

62

Greg left Fountainhead Tower and emerged into a crisp, sunny day. John Paul’s anniversary celebrations were getting into full swing. A brass band on a float was pounding out an amazing beat. In all the noise and mayhem, few seemed aware of what had happened in the courtyard.

Over loudspeakers, an announcer’s voice said, ‘Remember what they said to John Paul? They claimed he would turn the world into old-style Cambodia. The Communist Republic of Hell is how they described it. They said he would exterminate beauty. So were they right? Where are those slanderers now? They’re living in the decaying temples where once, in our madness and sadness, we worshipped them. We were herded into vast soulless arenas, surrounded on every side by garish adverts promoting faceless corporate giants, to worship our gods. We were barely able to see them because we were so far from the stage, and they weren’t playing anyway, just miming. The whole thing was pumped into the arena with perfect digital purity. A fake evening with our fake gods. But still we worshipped. At least Cambodia, even in the worst spasms of its pain, was real.’

There was an enormous cheer from the revellers.

‘So, on this day of great memories of our inspirational leader,’ the voice continued, ‘what song have we chosen to commemorate him? There was only ever one choice. The song is by that old Californian punk band *The Dead Kennedys*. The very name reflects the death of the Old World Order.

‘It’s almost time. Get ready to party. The new world is celebrating its first birthday. Year One is here.’

A siren burst into action, wailing across London, a call to attention. ‘Here we go,’ the announcer said, ‘It’s time for *A Holiday in Cambodia*.’ The opening chords replaced the siren. All over London banks of speakers pumped out the snarling voice of *The Dead Kennedys*’ lead singer Jello Biafra. Pandemonium erupted. Many revellers sported ridiculous bling crowns, copies of the ones Dosh and Rex had worn at their wedding. Some were chanting the favourite mantra of the old masters: ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the blingest of them all?’

Greg caught sight of himself in one of the mirrored glass plates of Fountainhead Tower. He had the most inane grin plastered over his face. Everyone was dancing wildly, chanting John Paul’s name, but the name he shouted was entirely different.

Thomas Payne.

63

Greg was still clutching Payne’s briefcase of cash. Why did Payne give it to him? For the irony? Thanks to him, money’s power was gone now.

He fished inside the briefcase, and grabbed a handful of £50 notes. He spread them out in a fan and stared at them. To think that people once worshipped these coloured pieces of paper. They appeared absurd now. He tore them up and stuffed the pieces into an overflowing bin, next to a decomposing banana. It seemed appropriate. Rotten fruit and rotten money.

He was just about to ditch the whole case when he noticed that a van delivering Mars Bars was stuck, unable to manoeuvre through the throng. He took the briefcase and headed for the lorry’s cabin. The driver was angry and frustrated, pumping his horn.

‘Give it up, mate,’ Greg said. ‘It’s over.’

‘What are you talking about? I need to get this delivery done. It’s my job.’

Greg held up his briefcase. ‘Listen, there are hundreds of thousands of pounds in here – easily enough to buy everything in the back of your van and give you the biggest payday of your life. Why don’t you take it?’ He flipped opened up the case.

The driver stared at the money. ‘Are you mad?’

‘I’m serious. I don’t care about money. It doesn’t matter anymore.’

The driver shrugged. ‘It still does it for me.’

‘Take it, then. And why don’t you come round the back and give me some help?’

‘With what?’

‘I’m going to hand out the Mars Bars.’

The driver laughed. 'What the hell, let's do it.' He shoved the briefcase under his seat, locked the cabin then came round to the back. The two men opened the container packed with boxes of Mars Bars. They ripped open a couple of boxes and tossed chocolate bars into the air in all directions. The crowd excitedly grabbed them. Then they heaved out whole boxes into the street. The throng tore them open and rapidly spread them around. Thousands got their free chocolate. The whole load was distributed in minutes.

Greg laughed louder than he ever had in his life. Everyone was having a Mars Bar day. The era of people doing shit jobs in shit offices to make their bosses rich was well and truly over. He bit into a bar and held it up in the air. 'To the Mars Bar Man – wherever you are – I salute you.' It didn't make any sense since he was that guy. But he didn't care.

'You're nuts,' the driver said with a big grin. They shook hands and patted each other on the back.

'What are you doing now?' Greg asked.

'I'm taking my money and getting out of here.'

'You're not staying to party?'

'Don't worry about me, mate. I'll be partying all right. Cheers.' And off went the driver.

'Cheers,' Greg echoed. He felt as though he were in a whole world of cheers. 'My life starts here,' he shouted at the top of his voice. Then he caught sight of Lucinda. She was standing crying at the bottom of the steps of Fountainhead Tower. He pushed through the throng to reach her.

'My God, Greg,' she said when she saw him. 'I can't believe what's happened. It's awful. Did you see it? It must have been a terrible accident.' Her hands were shaking. 'I only met the other guy this morning. Galt said he was a special adviser.'

'It was no accident. It was...'

Lucinda started weeping again. 'I can't believe John's gone. We were so close once. I'd started to hate him lately, but...'

'I know it's hard for you, but the world's better off without people like that.'

Lucinda didn't answer.

'So you knew nothing about Thomas Payne?' Greg asked.

'Who?'

'The special adviser.'

'He hardly spoke. John seemed to admire him. I don't understand why. He was the most anonymous man on earth.'

'That man just saved the world.'

'What?'

'You had a pretty good idea what Galt was up to, didn't you?'

Lucinda gazed down at the ground and nodded.

'You disagreed with his plan, didn't you?'

Lucinda nodded again. 'I swear, I had no idea how far he was intending to go. I just thought he was playing a clever game that would make him even richer. I was horrified when he said he wanted to bankrupt all of his rivals and run the world.'

'Well, thanks to Payne, we don't need to worry anymore. He gave his life to save us from Galt.'

'But it's so horrible.'

Greg took Lucinda's hand in his. 'The slate's been wiped clean. We can all start again. The bad old days are never coming back.'

'Why are you being nice to me, Greg? I never did you any favours.'

A group of revellers, laughing and cheering as they danced to *The Dead Kennedys*, barged past them, splitting them up.

Shit. Greg was desperate to get back to Lucinda, but the crowd was irresistible and carried him along in a huge flowing conga. All around, the big screens flashed up a message:

How will your movie end?

The music was getting louder and louder, the dancing more frenzied. An immense, surging mass was bouncing up and down, screaming and yelling. Ecstasy in their eyes. The future. A world of possibilities, opportunities, a million new roads opening up, things that had been denied to ordinary people for so long.

Greg wanted to make sure Lucinda was OK, to reassure her that she was part of all this. And then he saw her again. She was standing still, in the middle of the merrymakers. She looked ridiculous in her formal suit, so out of place. There was such a strange look in her eyes. Greg got the impression she wanted to join in but didn't feel she'd be accepted. She looked so lonely. Barging his way through the throng, he grabbed her hand. He pulled her into the middle of the street, the centre of the frenzy, leaned forward and kissed her as hard as he could.

She broke away. 'What are you doing?'

'Don't you see,' Greg shouted over the din, 'we don't have to be our old selves anymore. We're free now. Everyone's equal. I'm not scared now. I can do things I never dreamt possible. I saw the most remarkable man in the world leaping into oblivion, giving his life for me and for everyone else. I owe it to him to be everything I have it in me to be. I owe it to myself. Now I can say what I was always too scared to say.'

'Say what, Greg?'

'I love you, Lucinda.'

'What?'

'I love you.' Greg yelled it as loudly as he could.

'You're crazy.'

'No, for the first time in my life I know exactly what I'm doing.'

Greg grabbed Lucinda again, and this time she didn't pull away. She kissed him back just as passionately.

The screens were still flashing Payne's message: *How will your movie end?* The partygoers were pointing, trying to work out what it meant.

'I know,' Greg bellowed, 'I know.' Lucinda gave him a puzzled look then shrugged and laughed. They took each other's hands.

As he kicked away a bling crown that had fallen from someone's head and landed in front of him, Greg realised these weren't his closing images at all. They were the opening images of the new movie of his life, the movie he'd be happy to watch on an infinite loop. His life would be a collection of the most wondrous pearls scattered over a beach of gold in this new Eden. He'd have to polish every moment, to make each gleam and shine like a perfect mirror because he might be seeing himself reflected back in those mirror moments.

Forever.

FADE TO BLACK

